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OR, THE LARIAT QUEEN.

A Story of a Woman Righting a Wrong.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I. THE LARIAT QUEEN.

ACROSS the rolling prairie, stretching like a sea that was boundless in every direction, a woman was riding slowly, her eyes bent upon the sun that was slowly sinking below the horizon.

A woman, yes, for her face was stamped with character beyond her years, which scarcely numbered eighteen, and yet it was a fair face to look

ALL GAZED WITH UTTER AMAZEMENT UPON MAY LILLIE.

upon, innocent as a child's and with great lustrous eyes that seemed to look into one's soul.

Her form was small, slender and graceful, and it was clad in a jacket and skirt of buckskin, neatly embroidered in the Indian style, fringed and beaded, while her head was sheltered by a broad-brimmed sombrero encircled by a cord of gold, representing a lasso.

Her saddle was an elegant one, with a broad horn on the right side, and bespangled with silver, as was, also, the bridle. A coiled lasso hung over the pommel. At her back was slung a rifle, small, silver-mounted and yet deadly enough in her shapely hands, and about her slender waist was a sash in which were visible two fine revolvers.

She was mounted upon a spotted mustang, long-bodied, slender-limbed and with the look of a thoroughbred, full of spirit, endurance and fleet as a bird.

Afar off on the prairie was seen a clump of timber, where stood the house of a well-to-do ranchero, and scattered over the plains were many cattle watched by mounted cowboys.

But though night was coming on the young girl in buckskin did not seem to feel any uneasiness, and though miles away from her home, she rode along serenely, quietly regarding the sunset.

"It has gone," she said with a sigh, as though bidding farewell to a dear friend, and the tint of the western sky betrayed an expression of sadness upon her intelligent face.

"Now to watch the moon rise," she added after a moment, turning her eyes in the opposite direction where the horizon was just brightening with a silvery glow as the goddess of night was coming into view.

"There it comes!" she cried with a look of joy as she beheld the rim of the rising moon, and her face and manner brightened up now as though welcoming a friend dearly loved.

And in her interest the maiden drew rein and watched the rising orb until it had risen above the prairie horizon and was launched upon the blue skies for the long sail across limitless space.

Minutes passed away, and with the love of an artist she gazed upon the scene, the prairie now lighted by the full moon, the tint of the sun dying from the west, and a silence that was intense resting upon all.

The distant cattlemen were not discernible now; the timber was not to be seen; but, just then, was visible a light, like a beacon to guide the fair wanderer home.

Here and there chirping insects broke the silence yet were unheeded until the sharp yelp of a coyote awoke the young girl to the fact that she was alone upon the prairie at night, and miles from home.

"Come, Rascal, we must be going home, as they will be anxious about us," she said, and her horse at once set off in a swift canter.

More taken up with the beauty of the night than in watching her trail ahead, the young girl rider suddenly drew rein as her horse gave a startled snort, and a man arose from the grass ahead of her, hardly fifty feet away.

Quick as a flash she had drawn a revolver, and was ready to face friend and foe, when the one who barred her path called out:

"Hold, fair Lariat Queen, I am no red-skin foe to turn your revolver upon."

The man stood where the moonlight fell upon him, revealing a tall form of splendid physique, clad in buckskin, and a face at once fearless, reckless, and bronzed almost as dusky as the hue of an Indian.

He was armed with a belt in which were a pair of revolvers and an ugly-looking knife, and hanging to a hook upon one hip was a coiled lasso.

Lying flat down in the grass, ten feet from his master, was a horse, awaiting the command to rise, ere he dared do so.

The maiden seemed annoyed at being thus waylaid on her trail, and compressed her lips in an angry manner, while she replaced the revolver she had drawn from her sash.

After a silence which seemed to be getting painful to the man, who awaited for her to speak, she said in a voice changed in its tone from what it had been when she addressed her horse a short while before:

"I am not so sure, Carl Grafton, that you are not even a worse foe to me than an Indian would be, after your threats of a few days ago, and the words that you hated me as you did a snake."

"I was mad then, May, and I spoke unkind words that came not from my heart, for I meant that you had crept into my life only to sting me to death as an adder might, by refusing my love, refusing to become my wife; and

now I am here in your path again, and for the last time ask you if you will be mine?"

"And again I answer you *no*!" was the now emphatic response of the young girl.

CHAPTER II.

THE COWBOY LOVER.

THE man heard this prompt and pronounced rejection like one who had received a mortal wound, for he brought his white teeth together with a snap like a maddened wild beast.

"See here, May Lillie, you shall retract your words," he hissed, as he suddenly strode nearer to her.

She did not show the slightest alarm at his approach, and merely said:

"Further talk between us is useless, Carl Grafton, for I do not love you, nor can I ever do so."

"If you love me as you say I am sorry, but our lives can never unite; our paths go different ways."

"Now, stand aside and let me pass, for you do not wish to be rude, I know."

"I will not stand aside; I will have you hear what I have to say, for I am in no mood to trifle, now, I assure you."

"Nor am I to be trifled with," was the cool response of the undaunted girl.

"But you shall hear me, and I will have from your lips the real reason why you will not love me."

"You came to Captain Vail's ranch just one year ago to be the governess of his children, and up to the time I saw you, the day I saved the wagon train and all with it from destruction—saved your life, May Lillie, for the Comanches almost had you in their power—I have madly loved you, and I will not give you up."

"I am not an ignorant cowboy, as you know, for I was well-born and received a college education, only, I confess to you frankly, I was forced to fly from my home to save my neck from the hangman's grip."

"It is a long story, so I'll not tell it you, though, upon my honor, I was not guilty of murder, only circumstances pointed to me as the criminal, and I had no proof of my innocence."

"I came here with my whole life embittered, and became a wanderer over the prairies, at last turning cowboy and living a wild, reckless life."

"Then you came into my life, and I gave up my carousals, quit gambling, and lived for you alone."

"At last I asked you to become my wife, for you had been so good to me I believed that I had won your heart, and then it was I discovered, May Lillie, that you had been flirting with me, and refused my love which you had won from my innermost soul."

"Now, I say that I am not one to trifle with, and having reformed me, redeemed me from an evil life, taught me to love you, by Heaven but I swear to you that I will not give you up!"

The man spoke in an impassioned way that showed the depth of his feeling, and he now stood by her horse, his hand upon the horn of her saddle.

May Lillie's face was a picture of sadness, for, somehow, the earnest pleadings of this strong man made her feel deeply for him.

At last she spoke and her voice was low and sympathetic.

"Carl Grafton, you have been frank with me, in admitting what your past life has been and I will be equally so with you; I will tell you just what I now deem it your right to know."

"Yes, I admit that I owe you my life, my escape from a horrible fate at the hands of the Comanches, and that you risked your life to save us all."

"You were wounded and I felt deeply for you, and when Captain Vail had you taken to his home I was glad to be your nurse, and was happy when you recovered."

"You were educated and so became a companion for me, where so many about us were ignorant and uncouth."

"You were handsome, entertaining, and I was glad to know from others that I had a good influence over you, that you became changed from 'Mad Carl,' as they called you on account of your wild life, to Cowboy Carl simply, winning the respect of all."

"We became good pals, and I was so glad to have you help me, as you did, to become a real border girl, though I had had some experience in wild life before I became governess at Vail Ranch."

"You sung for me, taught me to throw the lasso, and were so good to me, and because I owed my life to you, I was good to you, Carl."

"But, not long ago I overheard it said that

you loved me, and that I returned that love. This startled me, and now I am going to confess to you why, Carl."

"It startled me because I saw at once what I had regarded as only friendly feeling, almost, I may say, a brotherly and sisterly love, was, on your part, more, and I had done wrong in letting you believe that I could return your affection, had done wrong simply from not realizing that you cared for me more than I did for you."

"And you do not love me after all your professions of regard?" the cowboy asked in a suppressed voice.

"I never professed to love you, Carl—only to respect and hold gratitude and friendship for you."

"I will now tell you my secret, if you will hear me."

"Do not tell me that you played with my heart, May Lillie, while you love another man, for I cannot bear that."

"I must tell you the truth, Carl, in justice to myself, in justice to one other whom I do love."

"Curses! Do you dare throw those words in my teeth—that you love another?"

"I dare tell you now, Carl Grafton, that I have no love to give you, for I am already a married woman!" said the Lariat Queen in a low, earnest tone.

CHAPTER III.

THE GOVERNESS.

CAPTAIN SAM VAIL had wandered to Texas in the days when Texans needed outside aid in their battle for independence from Mexico, and he had become the commander of a band of gallant rangers.

One day he had saved a wagon-train from being massacred and then met his fate in a settler's fair daughter, and she had become his wife in time.

From that day the ranger captain prospered, and he became a wealthy ranchero whose ranch was on the very border line of danger from raiding Mexicans across the Rio Grande and Comanches from the mountain country.

As the three children of Captain Vail began to grow in years, Mrs. Vail persuaded her husband to secure the services of a governess for them, and he wrote to an old friend who lived in a Western State to send to him one who would be suitable as an instructress, promising her a most liberal salary.

In a few weeks he received a letter that a young lady was on her way to the ranch, and he described her as a girl of good education, pluck and varied accomplishments, from music and art, to horseback riding and dead-shot shooting with rifle and revolver.

The captain and his wife were pleased with the description of the new governess, and the former started with an escort to bring her to "Paradise Ranch," as the prairie home of the Vails was called.

Somehow the captain's party missed the train, and one night it was attacked by Comanches, who would have overwhelmed its brave defenders but for the arrival of a party of five cowboys who dashed to the rescue, little caring for the odds against them.

The leader of the cowboys was Carl Grafton, the wildest and most reckless character known in those parts, and a man feared far and wide as a "terror."

But his pluck saved the train, and he nearly lost his own life, being badly wounded.

"Mad Carl," as he was called, was returning from a carnival over in the settlements, where he had gone to the rescue of the train, seeing its danger, and, being chief of Captain Vail's band of cowboys, he was taken home to the ranch to be nursed most tenderly by May Lillie, the young governess whom he had saved.

From that night Carl Grafton became a changed man, and men who had known him as a terror would never have recognized in the quiet young Texan the character of whose reckless career they had heard so much.

He ceased his wild ways, gave up liquor, cards and the life of a bravo, and devoted himself wholly to his duties as captain of the cowboys, and when not on duty was the very shadow of the pretty governess, who seemed to regard him with the sincerest friendship.

"May has reformed Mad Carl, wife, and he will make her a splendid husband, I am sure," said Captain Vail one day.

"No, she will never marry him, Sam," was the response of Mrs. Vail.

"Not marry him, and for why, for they certainly are desperately in love with each other."

"He loves her, yes, but her regard is only a friendly one for him, born of gratitude, and be-

cause she finds him far above those about her she is glad of his company.

"But May Lillie loves another man, or I am no judge of the nature of my own sex," said Mrs. Vail firmly.

"Then she should not encourage him, wife, for it will make him more desperate than ever before to find she does not love him."

"She does not know that he loves her, it seems; but he will soon tell her so, and then Heaven have mercy upon poor Carl," said Mrs. Vail fervently.

And lying in the hammock swung on the piazza of the cabin home, May Lillie overheard this conversation between Mrs. Vail and her husband.

It drove from her face every particle of color, and as the two walked away, not knowing that she had heard all, there came from her lips the low cry, almost a wail:

"My God! what have I done?"

"I never dreamed that Mad Carl the Cowboy loved me other than as a brother might love a sister."

"This must not be! it must not be!"

She sprung from the hammock, and as she turned into the hallway came face to face upon the cowboy.

His face was serious now, and he said in a low tone:

"Miss May, I rode over from the camps to have a talk with you, for I have something to tell you."

"To tell me?" gasped May, in great distress.

"Yes, come with me to the rustic seat on the creek bank yonder, and let me tell you a secret."

She would have refused, and yet she knew that it was her duty now to undeceive him, for she guessed, as only a woman can guess, what that secret was.

With a pale face and quivering lips, May Lillie went to the seat over on the banks of the pretty stream, and then, in his frank way, Carl Grafton told her of his love for her, a love which he said had become an idolatrous worship of her.

She heard him in silence and with a face that showed how deeply his confessions of love pained her, and then she took his hand in both her own, and said, with a quivering voice:

"Carl, forgive me, my dear friend, for having, in my deep gratitude to you for saving my life, in my pleasure in your company, and in your friendship, allowed you to feel that there could be between us more than a friendly regard."

"I do not love you as you ask me to, I never can."

He rose, gazing into her face like a wild beast at bay, and then came his savage words and cruel threat:

"May Lillie, if you speak the truth, I hate you, and I vow before Heaven that you shall become my wife, or die by my hand!"

Then, without a word more, he strode rapidly away, threw himself upon his waiting horse and dashed away over the prairies.

CHAPTER IV.

HER SECRET.

It can now be understood why Carl the Cowboy laid in wait for the young governess on that moonlight night, for he had determined to make one more effort to win her, once more to hear from her whether she would refuse him or accept his love.

Weeks had gone by since the scene between them when he first learned from her the, to him, fatal truth that she did not regard him as he did her, and in that time he had not begun his wild orgies again.

He had devoted himself to his duties most faithfully, but all could see that some great change had come over him, and Captain Vail and his wife guessed the cause, for they saw that May Lillie seemed distressed also.

The cowboy had determined to give the woman he loved a chance to reconsider what she had said to him, and he did so.

Finding out that she avoided him he had watched his chance and when the sun set had gotten upon her path home, made his horse lie down in the grass, and thus awaited her coming.

What followed the reader knows, and it was with a face writhing with suffering that the cowboy awaited to hear what more she would say to him.

What excuse would she offer for not loving him, he wondered, for he knew that he was a handsome, fascinating fellow whom women ad-

mired, and why should he not with all his devotion, and more, the fact that May Lillie owed to him her life, win her love?

"You say you will not marry me?" he almost hissed through his shut teeth, and then had followed her startling confession that she was a married woman.

It was almost a shriek that broke from the man's lips as he heard this, and then came the words savagely uttered:

"You lie, May Lillie, you lie!"

"You say this to keep me away from you!"

"Upon my honor, Carl Grafton, I tell you the truth, for I would not deceive you, as I have already I fear done wrong in showing my friendship for you as I have done."

"You shall hear my story, and then you will understand me and we will be good friends as before."

"Never!"

"Will you hear what I have to say?"

"Yes."

"I will soon tell you the story, and it will prove to you that I have not had, nor can I have for you other love than friendly regard."

"I have been married now over a year to the only man I ever loved, or could love as wife should love a husband."

"Ho, too, saved my life, and when we were almost children, or I was at least."

"He is in the Government service, a scouting officer in command of Pawnee scouts, and wishing to aid him all in my power, I accepted a position as teacher, and that led to my coming to Vail Ranch as governess."

"I told him of my offer, a most generous one, and as he was to be absent on scouting duty for a long time, he consented, if I would first unite myself to him in marriage."

"We were married one morning by the post chaplain, and my husband went away at the head of his Pawnees an hour after, and I started for Vail Ranch the very next day."

"And you love this man, May Lillie?"

"With all my heart and soul I love him, Carl Grafton."

"And the Vails know you are married?"

"No, for my husband asked me to keep the secret for awhile, and we deemed it best to do so, though when I came here I took his name, as the chaplain who married us said it would be best, and he secured the place as governess for me."

"Then you are not Miss but Mrs. May Lillie."

"I am Mrs. May Lillie, Carl."

"Ha! I have heard the name, and you spoke of your husband as commanding Pawnee scouts under the Government?" and a wicked look crossed the face of the cowboy.

"Yes, his name is Gordon Lillie."

"Yes, Gordon W. Lillie, I recall it now, though I had forgotten it."

"He has another name, May Lillie?"

"Yes, he is known upon the border by a nickname."

"Suppose I tell you that it is as Pawnee Bill that he is known."

"Ah! you know him?"

"Know him! By Heaven it was he who was sent out after me once to capture me for killing a soldier who insulted me one day in camp."

"He did capture me, took me back in bonds, and had I not escaped I would have been hanged by the military."

"Yes, I know your husband, Pawnee Bill, I know him well, Mrs. Lillie, and I am happy to feel now that you are his wife."

"Why do you say so, Carl?"

"Because as another's I hate you, and I have vowed you should never marry another man."

"But as you are now another's, I will not kill you, as I threatened, but make you suffer, and through Pawnee Bill, upon whom I have also sworn vengeance for his act toward me."

"Go your way now, May Lillie, and know that in refusing the love of Carl, the mad cowboy, you have made a foe that will never show mercy, you and your husband."

The words, tone and manner of the love-maddened cowboy were appalling, and brave as was May Lillie she shrunk from his look which the moonlight revealed but too distinctly.

But she did not lose her presence of mind for an instant, and said, calmly:

"Then I now know that in you I am to feel that I have a bitter foe?"

"Yes, a cruel, merciless one, May Lillie—one who will laugh at the misery which he will bring upon you."

"So be it! Stand from my path, sir!" and her voice rung out angrily.

He stepped to one side quickly, doffed his sombrero and bowed low as she passed on.

Then came the mad cowboy's parting threat:

"It is war between us, May Lillie—war to the knife, and knife to the hilt!"

She made no response to this threat, but rode homeward at a run, while she muttered to herself with foreboding of evil:

"Something tells me that the cowboy means all that he threatens."

CHAPTER V.

A BOY ALLY.

THE family at Paradise Ranch consisted of Captain Sam Vail, his wife, a son of fourteen, daughter of twelve and a little girl of eight.

Then there was the young governess whom all loved, and a couple of servants who had followed Mrs. Vail's parents out into the land of danger.

The cowboys, under their chief, Carl Grafton, had their camp a couple of miles away upon the banks of the stream, and they numbered just thirteen with their captain.

They were rangers as well as cowboys, and had rendered valuable service fighting back the Comanches and in battling with the bands of outlaw Mexicans who raided into Texas whenever opportunity afforded.

With their duties as rangers and herders, the cowboys had no easy life of it, and yet Carl Grafton had often found time to ride with May Lillie over the prairies or to visit her at the ranch, for Captain Vail had seemed to favor the love of the handsome, and now tamed cowboy, for the pretty governess, he not suspecting, the secret of her life.

Not until she had dashed into the yard about the ranch, did May Lillie draw rein, after leaving Cowboy Carl.

She seemed to feel that he might follow her and another scene occur, and she urged her horse to his full speed, heading straight toward the light which gleamed far out over the prairie.

"I was just going to look for you, Miss May, for mother was anxious about you, as she said you rode away alone," said Dick Vail as he met the governess.

Dick was a well-grown, frank-faced fearless lad of fourteen, and though not fond of his books he always studied hard to please his governess, who was very much attached to him.

"I was detained unexpectedly, Dick; but after supper I wish to see you, for I have a secret to tell you."

"All right, Miss May, I'll be on hand when you are ready; but supper is ready now," and Dick led the horse away while May Lillie hastened in to the supper table.

In spite of her assumed gayety, Mrs. Vail felt sure that something had occurred to mar her ride, and naturally supposed that she had met Carl Grafton and he had been pressing his suit again.

As soon as she could after supper, May Lillie left the family circle and Dick promptly followed.

They walked toward the stream and sat down upon the rustic seat where Carl Grafton had made known his love.

"Dick?"

"Yes, Miss May."

"You are far older than your years, and the cowboys all say that you are as good as any man when it comes to plucky work to be done, and I know you to have a great big heart."

"Then you are a splendid rider, a dead shot, and are to be trusted wholly."

"Lor! Miss May, you make me 'shamed, praising me up like that," said Dick.

"I do so, Dick, simply to show you that I intend to confide a secret to you, and feel that you can help me."

"Of course I will, Miss May, and I'll keep the secret, too."

"Now, Dick, there is one I love most dearly, and I got a letter from him, for you brought me the letter from the settlement the other day, you remember?"

"Yes, miss, but what a goose Cowboy Carl is to write you, when he can see you any day."

"Ah, Dick, it was not from Cowboy Carl, but one whom I love most dearly."

"I thought you was gone on Carl, Miss May, and I knew he had it bad on you."

"No, no; I liked Carl as I do you, as one I owed much to, and he misunderstood me and wanted me to marry him."

"But I love the one from whom I got the letter, and told Carl Grafton so."

"I'll bet he got mad clean through, Miss May."

"He became very savage, Dick, and threatened to make me suffer."

"Carl must not threaten you, Miss May."

"I won't stand that!" said the plucky boy.

"He will not harm me, Dick, but one other,

the one I love, and in that way he will get his revenge upon me."

"But how will he know about this one you love, Miss May?"

"I told him why I could not love him, and he knows who it is that I do love."

"Then, too, he has reason to hate him, though the one to whom I refer, was doing his duty in arresting Carl as he did."

"And Carl is full of revenge, for I have heard him say often he would never forget or forgive an injury, and would never rest until it was avenged."

May Lillie shuddered in spite of herself, but said:

"Yes, and it is through the one I love Cowboy Carl will strike at my heart."

"But he is not here?"

"No, but his letter said he was coming here within the next month, and then Cowboy Carl will strike his blow."

"Not if I can help it, Miss May."

"Ah! that is just what I knew you would say, Dick, and what I wished you to do, for you must help me, you must save the one I love from Cowboy Carl."

"I'll do it, Miss May, if it comes to a quarrel between Cowboy Carl and me, for I am not afraid of him, dangerous as he is," and the boy spoke in no tone of bravado.

"No, no, Dick, for you must have no trouble with that man—no! no! no!" she said, excitedly.

"I don't wish to, Miss May, for I like Carl immensely, and am really very sorry you do not love him."

"You tamed him completely, for he used to be such a wild terror, and I hoped you were going to marry him some day; but he must not make you suffer just because you do not love him, and he shall not if I can help it."

"You dear, good Dick, and you can help me to watch Cowboy Carl, and also to keep a lookout for the one I spoke of, so as to put him on his guard."

"Carl must not suspect you of watching him, and thus you can be my brave ally to save the life of a noble man, and deepest sorrow from falling upon me."

"I'm your pard, Miss May," was Dick's energetic response, and he held forth his hand which was firmly grasped by May Lillie, who now in the friendship of this young lad felt the greatest confidence.

CHAPTER VI. THE EAVESDROPPER.

WHEN May Lillie dashed away in the moonlight, leaving Cowboy Carl standing upon the prairie, her heart would have sunk within her had she glanced back and seen his action toward her.

As he bowed with mock courtesy, when he stood aside for her to pass he bent low until she had urged her horse into a run.

Then a cry was crushed between his teeth and with a bound he was by the side of his prostrate horse.

Stooping, the Mad Cowboy unslung his rifle from the saddle-horn, and throwing it to his shoulder drew a bead upon May Lillie as her horse was flying away over the prairie; but the finger did not draw upon the trigger, though the aim was deadly.

With the sudden impulse of his nature he threw the rifle upon the prairie and hissed forth:

"Fool! fool! would I destroy my sweetest revenge by killing her?"

"No, no, she is another's and because she does not love me, because another claims her, she shall know what my revenge is, what it shall be to cast aside the heart of Carl the Mad Cowboy."

"My God! I suffered for a crime I never was guilty of, and it turned my heart to gall."

"Then it seemed that I loved to kill, and pity was foreign to my heart until I met her."

"I believe I was, as they said, mad, a madman indeed."

"When she crossed my path, my life changed and I held something to live for, as I believed."

"I forsook evil and became good, for all the while I believed that she would love me."

"And now, when I tell her of my devoted love, she refuses my idolatrous worship and tells me she is already a wife, the wife of a man I once vowed to kill, for right or wrong I never forgive, and he took me back to prison in irons, where, had I not escaped, I would have been hanged."

"And she is his wife?"

"Well, they shall both feel my revenge in its fullest measure; they shall suffer and know who it is that wrings their hearts with anguish."

"Ha! ha! I can hate as madly as I love."

With these savagely uttered words the Mad Cowboy called to his horse to get up from his prostrate position, picked up his rifle and hung it on the saddle-horn, and then, with a bound was in his saddle and away.

He rode straight away on the trail taken by May Lillie, and yet did not enter the yard about the cabin, but turned down the stream where he left his horse staked out.

"I must see her again, to make my hate more bitter," he muttered, and he strode on back toward the cabin.

Leaping the fence with the ease of a deer, he had reached the rustic seat on the bank of the little stream, when he beheld two persons coming out of the cabin.

He quickly made a spring, seized a limb and drew himself up into a tree by which he was standing.

The foliage was thick and perfectly concealed his form, and right to the rustic seat within twenty feet of him came May Lillie and Dick.

Every word that they uttered was heard by the eavesdropper, and he gnashed his teeth to keep back the emotion in his heart which seemed to wish to burst forth in a wild war-cry, or curses.

At last they went away and he descended from his hiding-place.

"Yes, I have seen her again, and it has made my hatred more bitter."

"I need nothing more now to stifle any feeling of love, any atom of pity."

"I will act, and they shall feel."

"So that boy is her ally, is he?"

"Well, I am glad that being forewarned I am forearmed, for Dick will make a dangerous foe, young as he is."

"Now what is before me, for I must begin my work now, starting from this spot where I heard the refusal of my love, where I heard her plot with a boy to thwart my vow of revenge."

"She fears me, that is certain."

"Not for herself, for she knows not the feeling of fear, as I have reason to know; but she fears me for his sake, the man through whom I shall strike to reach her heart."

"What is before, God only knows; but from this spot I go now to carry out the destiny my hatred begets, and come what may I shall neither seek mercy nor show it."

With this he walked away, leaped the fence once more, hardly noticing, it seemed, that it barred his way, and reaching the spot where his horse was he mounted and rode away toward the cowboy camps.

The night passed away in anxiety to May Lillie, and it was nearly dawn before she closed her eyes in sleep, so much did she dread that both she and Dick would be powerless to save the life of Gordon Lillie, for through him she now knew the blow was to fall upon her.

It was late when she awoke, and she hastened to dress.

The birds were singing in the trees, and the calm of a Sabbath morning rested upon the household.

Going down to breakfast she found that Captain Vail and Dick were not there, they having ridden over to the cowboys' camp, as a messenger had come in haste for the captain.

Soon they returned and then the story was told of how Carl the Cowboy had mysteriously disappeared during the night.

His horses and traps were gone, and the only word of farewell he had left was a placard upon his cabin door which read:

"Farewell forever, pards."

"CARL, the Mad Cowboy."

CHAPTER VII.

TWO SCOUTS.

THOUGH May Lillie and Dick might have accounted for the mysterious departure of Carl, the Cowboy, they said not a word.

The captain wondered why he had gone, and especially as he had left several months' pay undrawn in his hands.

The farewell upon the door of his cabin, for his fellow cowboys, had said "forever," and so that implied that he was not to return.

The other cowboys knew nothing, could think of nothing to account for his strange going.

He had had a quarrel with none of them, had appeared in the large shanty, where most of them made their home, and not a word had he said to give a clue to his strange going.

They had all believed that he would win May Lillie, for that he loved her all knew, and that she had refused the handsome, dashing cowboy dandy they could not believe.

Captain Vail returned from the cowboy camps greatly worried, and, after breakfast, he had a talk with his wife.

"What does it all mean, Sarah?" he asked, when May Lillie had gone to the study-room with the three children.

"It means that Carl was too desperately in love with May to remain here after he saw that she did not love him."

"But don't she?"

"Nonsense, Sam, did I not say she loved some one else?"

"Yes, and I guess you were right, wife."

"I do believe," continued that astute lady, "if May had not been in love that Carl would have won her heart."

"He is as handsome as a picture, dressed handsomely, in spite of his being a cowboy, and she told me that she never heard a finer voice."

"Then he was well educated, and had read a great deal, not to speak of his reckless courage, dash and deviltry."

"Yes, he was a thorough devil, surely."

"Yes, he has had crosses in his life, and bitter ones to bear, I feel certain, and he became reckless and was going to the dogs when he met May."

"Her beauty and noble nature impressed him, held an influence over him for good alone, and drew him back from the brink of destruction."

"There was that about her dash, her riding, shooting and lariat-throwing that won him too, and when he lost her, he left her."

"That is all there is about it, Sam."

"I guess you have got it down pretty fine, Sarah; but suppose I ask May about him?"

"It will do no good, for if there had been anything she wished to tell she would have out with it when you came back from the camps."

"Well, I am awful sorry to lose Carl, for he was the best herdsman I ever saw, and both Indians and Mexican raiders were afraid of him and his little band."

And in her little cabin where she taught her three scholars, May Lillie attended faithfully to her duties for the hours of the morning, when school was dismissed for the balance of the day, for Mr. Vail always wished it so.

Then came dinner and after it Dick went for a ride with his teacher, and for some reason they slipped off without letting Violet know of their going.

"Well, Dick, Carl went very soon, did he not?" asked the young governess, by way of opening the conversation.

"Yes, Miss May, and it looks bad to see him go that way."

"He is determined to lie in wait for Gordon, I am sure."

"The one you spoke of, Miss May?"

"Yes."

"Is he a frontiersman?"

"Yes."

"He will stand no chance with Cowboy Carl, Miss May, if he is a tenderfoot."

"He will stand no chance with a man who will assassinate him, kill him from an ambush," said May Lillie almost fiercely.

"Do you think Carl would do that, May?"

"I know that he will do anything in his present frame of mind."

"He has the name of standing up and facing a fight against big odds, Miss May."

"True, but here he means to strike at me, and he knows Gordon well, so will take no chances."

"He will have to catch him off his guard to kill him, and this he is aware of."

"But you do not know when to expect him?"

"No, and for that reason I wish to know just where Cowboy Carl has gone."

"How can you find out, Miss May?"

"I am going to follow his trail," was the stern response of the young girl.

"Oh! that's it."

"Yes, Dick, and we will pick his trail up where he left the camp."

"We can do it, Miss May, for he took his pack-mule and three riding horses with him and they will leave a broad trail."

"Yes, and here is the trail, for there are the tracks of the mule and the three horses now," and May Lillie pointed to a trail crossing their own, but which only a well-trained border eye would have noted.

"You have good eyes, Miss May, and I guess Carl the Cowboy was right, when he said you were the best lasso-thrower in Texas, and could trail as well as he could," said Dick with admiration at his teacher's accomplishments.

"Then he must beware that I do not track him to his doom, for I vow from my inmost heart, Dick, if he harms Gordon Lillie, I will trail him to the gallows," and May Lillie spoke with an earnestness that showed she meant all that she said.

Having noted the direction which Cowboy Carl's trail led the two scouts, a woman and a

boy set off to follow it, and discover whether the one they followed had gone toward the settlements across the Rio Grande, or up into the Indian country, or meant to camp on the trail along which he knew Gordon Lillie must come to reach Paradise Ranch.

CHAPTER VIII.

OFF ON THE COWBOY'S TRAIL.

NOR until night came on did May Lillie and Dick halt on the trail left by the Mad Cowboy.

There was no mistake about it, for there were the marks of his three horses and pack-mule, and yet it so led that up to nightfall the two trailers could not tell whether it would hold on across the Rio Grande, branch southward toward the settlements, or hold northward.

"To-morrow is mail day, Miss May, so I will go to the settlements and follow the trail on from this point," said Dick.

"I will accompany you there, Dick, and follow the trail while you go on to the settlements after the mail, for perhaps there may be another letter from Gordon, saying just when he will come."

So back at a swift gallop they went to the ranch, their way soon lighted by the rising moon. The next day May Lillie said there was to be no school as she wished to go with Dick, who was going after the mail.

"There's something up between those two, Sam," said the observing Mrs. Vail, and she made up her mind to see just what it was.

Arriving at the spot where they had left the trail the night before, May Lillie picked it up, while Dick rode on toward the settlements, promising to return to that point and wait for his governess, as she would do for him if he was the first to arrive there.

For nine miles did May Lillie follow the trail, and then a cry came from her lips as she saw that it branched away to the north.

Just where it did so the northern trail was found leading on down toward the settlements.

"He has not gone to the settlements, nor across the Rio Grande, but upon the northern trail."

"That can mean but one thing—to lie in wait to kill Gordon Lillie!" said the fair lariat-thrower, as she regarded attentively the trail of the Mad Cowboy.

Having made this discovery, which aroused her fears of trouble ahead, the Girl Lariat-Thrower, as the cowboys had named her, went back on the trail to meet Dick, her boy ally.

Dick had ridden hard, for he was not going to be left out if there was to be any discovery made, so he had not spared his mustang pony.

May was surprised to see him coming back so soon, fairly flying over the prairies, and as he drew near he called out:

"I'm back, Miss May, and here's a letter for you."

She grasped it eagerly, and read:

"Expect me within a few days after receiving this letter."

"GORDON."

It had been hastily penned, evidently to catch a mail, and May's face wore an anxious look as she read it.

"Dick?"

"Yes, Miss May."

"I found out which way Carl the Cowboy took."

"Was it the northern trail, Miss May?"

"Yes."

"Then he means mischief."

"He certainly does, and there is but one thing to do."

"I'm ready, governess."

"We must return to the ranch, take your father into our confidence, and get him to go with the cowboys upon the northern trail and meet Gordon."

They must not know, however, why they go, for I do not wish them to suspect Carl of treachery.

"Now, let us ride back with all haste."

And back over the trail flew the two ponies, never slackening their pace until they dashed up to the door of Captain Vail's very large and comfortable cabin home.

The captain came out and met them, divining from their hard riding, since he had seen them appear far off over the prairies, that something was wrong.

"What's up, Dick?" he called out.

"I have a confidence to make to you, Captain Vail, and perhaps I should have told you before, only I did not wish to betray a secret not wholly

mine, nor did I desire to cast a suspicion upon a man without feeling sure I had cause.

"I took Dick into my confidence, and now I wish to tell you the situation as it is."

The manner of the pretty border governess impressed the captain and he at once led the way to a seat on the piazza while Dick took the tired horses to the stable.

Then May Lillie told her story in her honest way, and Captain Vail's face showed his sympathy and anxiety for her.

"Miss May," he said, after a short deliberation, "I see but one thing to be done, for I know of no man more to be dreaded in his hatred than Carl the Cowboy."

"If he has taken the northern trail it is to lie in wait for your husband, and nothing else, and he must be headed off in his treacherous work."

"You are very kind, Captain Vail, and I feel that you will do all you can to save Gordon from death."

"Yes, or rather Dick will, for he is in the secret, and you know he is a splendid scout and a good fellow to help one in trouble, boy though he is."

"Now, my plan is to send Dick, with four cowboys, off on the trail, and he can meet Captain Lillie and escort him here."

"He can also trail Carl the Cowboy to his hiding-place, saying that I sent after him to discover why he had left us as he did, and to pay him his back salary."

"This will thwart Carl in his red work, for he will not attempt to ambush if he knows Captain Lillie has an escort, and once warned of his danger, from all I have heard of your husband's gallant career, he is pretty well able to take care of himself."

"Oh, yes, sir, once warned of danger from a secret foe, and such a foe as I know Carl the Cowboy to be, Gordon can take care of himself; but let me thank you, Captain Vail, for your great kindness to me."

"Never mind the thanks, Miss May, and Dick will be the one to deserve them when he has accomplished his work."

"There he comes now, and I will tell him what he is to do, and he must pick his four men and be off at once."

Dick's eyes sparkled with pride and pleasure at the task set for him to do, and he said at once:

"I am so glad to go, and I'll take Buckskin Charlie,* father, and his three pards, whom the boys, you know, call the Four Aces."

"They are the four you need, Dick, so I'll give you the money for Carl the Cowboy, and you must get off within the hour, so as to be at the spot where Miss May left the trail, ready to follow it by dawn."

"I'll get there on time, sir," said Dick, and within the hour he was on the trail with what he called his full hand of "Four Aces."

CHAPTER IX.

BUCKSKIN CHARLIE.

BUCKSKIN CHARLIE, a dashing, good-looking young ranger cowboy, was popular with all who knew him.

Courteous as a Chesterfield toward all, genial in his manner with his comrades, fearless and with a record of pluck and heroism, he was the beau ideal of a plainsman, a wild rider, dead shot and perfect scout and guide.

He was known as the "lieutenant" of the cowboys, while Carl was their chief, but had been placed at once in command by the ranchero, as soon as the Mad Cowboy had so mysteriously left the ranch.

"Well, Dick, what is the racket?" he asked, as the party rode away from the cowboy camp.

"It's to find Carl the Cowboy, Charlie," replied Dick.

"Well, it is my opinion that Carl the Cowboy is crazy, as men have said he was."

"I am sorry he left us, though his going was my gain; but I guess he could not stand it any longer without a spree and has gone off to have one."

"But on this trail, Dick, you are captain, so give your orders and we will obey to the top-notch," said Buckskin Charlie.

"Well, father told me to find Carl the Cowboy and ask why he left as he did, and also to pay him the salary due him, and which he did not ask for before he left."

"Then, Buckskin Charlie, we are to meet a gentleman coming down the northern trail,

*Charles B. Owens, a well known scout of the Southwest.

who is to visit the ranch, for he is a friend of Miss May."

Buckskin Charlie gave a low whistle and made no reply just then.

He was riding ahead with Dick, and the three others of the party were coming along behind, a few rods away.

At last Buckskin Charlie said:

"Dick?"

"Yes, Charlie?"

"I am no fool."

"No one ever suspected you of being, Buckskin Charlie."

"You are on the trail of Carl the Cowboy?"

"Yes."

"You are to find him?"

"Yes."

"And after you find him you are to go on the northern trail to meet a gent?"

"That is it."

"He is coming to visit the ranch?"

"He is."

"And is a friend of the Lasso Queen?"

"Yes."

"Dick?"

Dick nodded in response.

"I know why Carl the Mad Cowboy lit out."

"Why?"

"Well, you see he was over head and ears in love with the Lariat Queen, and I don't blame him for that, for I've got it bad myself, as have all the cowboy outfit of Paradise Ranch."

"But Carl's case is incurable, and because he saved her life, and she treated him kindly in return, he believed she was gone on him—see?"

Dick again nodded, and it struck him that Buckskin Charlie was a good guesser.

Now Carl made a break and asked her to marry him, and the result was she told the old story, of how she was sorry, would be a sister to him, but loved some one else—I've had the same game played on me a hundred times, Dick, and you'll get it too when you begin to love the wrong woman, for you'll be a dandy among the girls, young fellow, when you get older."

"I like girls, Charlie," innocently said Dick.

"Yes, and they'll like you, and there will be heart-aches for you and for them, but it is seldom a man gets the disease so bad he can't be cured, though I have known of such cases, and Carl the Cowboy is one of them clean through."

"You think so, Charlie?"

"I know it, Dick, for I read signs more than books."

"You see, I'm on the right trail and don't you forget it, for I see in my mind's eye that Carl got fired, bounced, sat upon, and it hit him where he lived, being a fatal wound for a man of his character."

"So he just took the trail away from the woman he loved, and being revengeful, and knowing that her lover was coming—"

"Her lover?"

"Yes, Dick, the gent we are going to meet, after we find Mad Carl, for I'll wager my lariat that he's the one who caused Carl to get a stab in the heart."

"And he is revengeful, and might wish to strike his rival, so we are on the trail to see that he don't do it."

"Now you need not say a word, Dick, for I see that game clean through, and you may rely upon me that Mad Carl does not cause the Lariat Queen sorrow by any revengeful act he may contemplate against the man who stands in his way."

"I guess we had better push on, Dick, for I know all that Mad Carl is when he is on a trail of devilry."

Dick looked at Buckskin Charlie with supreme admiration.

He had always admired him greatly, but the way in which he read the story of the rivals for May Lillie's love almost astounded the boy.

But he wisely kept silent, allowing Buckskin Charlie to draw his own conclusions without aid from him.

So they pushed on more rapidly, the moon having now risen to lighten their path over the prairie.

It was a couple of hours before dawn when they halted at the spot where May Lillie and Dick had parted and met on the trail, and though Buckskin Charlie suggested a better camping-place, Dick said that he would rather camp there and they did.

But when Dick arose from his blankets, a quarter of an hour after dawn, he found Buckskin Charlie carefully examining the ground for "signs," and heard the low uttered words:

"You and the Lariat Queen were here yesterday, Dick."

CHAPTER X.
THE BOY CAPTAIN.

IN answer to Buckskin Charlie's assertion, that he and May Lillie had been at that spot the day before, Dick replied:

"Yes, when I went to the settlements after the mail, Miss May rode this far with me."

Buckskin Charlie made no reply, but they had their breakfast, mounted their horses and rode on.

"Yes, Dick, you went on to the settlements after the mail, and the Lariat Queen came this way alone," said Buckskin Charlie after riding some distance in silence.

"You see her trail?"

"Yes, and she was following the trail of Carl the Cowboy."

"Yes, both are plain enough."

"Though Carl's is older than the Queen's."

"But we will soon know how far she went on it, and she's a good trailer to follow it as she has, in places where it is hard to find it."

"She has splendid eyes, Buckskin Charlie."

"Yes, and it is those same splendid eyes which have raised the trouble with Mad Carl's heart, and with all of us for that matter."

"I am dead right, Dick, that she wanted to know which trail Mad Carl took, and I have my idea now which it was."

"Which, Charlie?"

"He didn't go to the settlements?"

"No."

"Well, a few miles on ahead we will see if he held on to the Rio Grande trail, or turned around the range and took the northern trail."

Dick was silent.

He could not say anything without betraying the confidence placed in him by his pretty governess, and he saw that Buckskin Charlie had read the situation almost as well as he knew it, and without any aid from him.

There was the old trail of Carl the Mad Cowboy, his three horses and pack-mule, and there was the fresher one of the Lariat Queen.

The three other cowboys merely followed in the rear of the young captain and Buckskin Charlie, not having been asked to lend any aid in trailing, and so not bothering themselves until called upon for their assistance.

They knew they were going to find Carl the Cowboy, and that was all they cared to know just then.

At last they came to the river, where the trail divided, one going across and holding on toward the Rio Grande, the other winding around a spur of a range of hills and bending northward.

"Right here the Lariat Queen turned back, Dick, for she saw all that she cared to learn, for you see Mad Carl held on to the north!"

"Yes, Charlie."

"So we will push on rapidly now on Carl's trail, for delays are dangerous you know."

"I am with you, Charlie," responded Dick, only too willing to go ahead at greater speed.

So on the party dashed at a gallop, watching only on either side now to see that the Mad Cowboy had not turned from the trail, for Buckskin Charlie had told every one to keep their eyes open to see whether Carl had left the track or not.

For miles they pushed along until they came to where three trails ran into the one they were following, and all came from the northward.

"We will halt here, Dick," said Buckskin Charlie.

"You expect to find Carl here?"

"Yes, not far from this point, for see his trail goes to the left here."

They halted their tired horses, and then Buckskin Charlie and Dick went on ahead on foot, following the Mad Cowboy's trail.

"Be ready, pard, to come if you hear my call," said Buckskin Charlie as he walked away.

"We'll be with you, Buckskin," responded one of the men, and they prepared to stake all the horses out.

Following the Mad Cowboy's trail, Buckskin Charlie and Dick, after a walk of a mile, came upon a camp in a notch among the hills.

"There's the camp, Dick."

"Yes, but where is Carl?"

"We'll look him up, for he's not far away," was the reply.

There was the camp of the Mad Cowboy, two of his horses and the pack-mule staked out, and his pack-saddle and blankets near a fire in a crevice of the rocks.

Dick at once began a search for the trail of the third horse, and Buckskin Charlie watched him quietly.

"Here's the trail, Charlie."

"Yes, Dick, and it leads toward the pass, yonder."

"It does, just where the three trails join."

"And what do you make out of this trail, Dick?"

"There are the tracks of horses going back and forth over it."

"Yes, Mad Carl has been doing sentinel duty for some time, and he is in earnest getting to the place where he is in ambush by dawn, and leaving only at dark, for he knows the one he seeks will not travel by night."

"Come on, Dick."

They followed the trail at a rapid walk, and it led them into the canyon, a pass where the three trails met.

They went cautiously now, and soon Dick whispered:

"There's Carl, Charlie."

"Right you are, and on the watch ahead, not behind him, for his game lies in that direction."

"He is no man to give a surprise to, so just hail him, Dick, while I keep out of sight, and, if he gets ugly, why he shall not hurt you, rely upon it."

So Buckskin Charlie stepped behind some rocks, though still keeping the Mad Cowboy in sight, while Dick, standing out clear in the canyon, raised his voice and shouted:

"Ho, Carl, I am looking for you!"

CHAPTER XI.

TRACKED.

THE effect of Dick Vail's shout was startling upon the Mad Cowboy, for he answered it with a wild yell, sprung to his feet and leveled his rifle at the boy, while he cried savagely:

"What brings you here, boy?"

Dick did not flinch, though he knew his danger, but called out in response:

"Father sent us to find you, Carl."

There was an emphasis upon the *us* which was emphasized the more by Buckskin Charlie stepping into view and calling out:

"Ho, Carl, old pard, I'm glad we have found you!"

The face of the Mad Cowboy was so devilish in its rage and fury that Buckskin Charlie did not know what he might do, if he believed that they alone had followed him, so he called out in a clear voice:

"Oho, pards, we have found Dandy Carl!"

Instantly the face of Mad Carl changed.

Had those two alone, Buckskin Charlie and the boy, been all that were near, his face showed that he meant to kill them if he could.

But with others near even he, desperate as he was, dared not make the venture, so he said quietly:

"I bade farewell to the ranch, I owe none of you anything, so why did you follow me?"

He addressed Dick rather than Buckskin Charlie, for the two had now advanced to where he stood upon his blanket, which had been spread upon the rocks.

Not far away, over among a clump of trees, was his horse, muzzled and hopped, and the position the man held commanded a view of the three trails meeting in the canyon, and also held in easy range any one going through the pass, while he was concealed completely.

Having overheard what he had between the Lariat Queen and Dick, her story to the boy and enlisting him as her ally, Mad Carl the Cowboy naturally supposed that he was there to protect Gordon Lillie from his revenge.

But Dick said in an innocent way:

"Father and all of us, Carl, were sorry you left as you did, and he sent me to find you and ask if we had any of us angered you and to ask you to return to the ranch."

"Never?"

"Are you angry with us, Carl?"

"I am angry with every human being, boy, myself in particular."

"I left the ranch forever, and I am here now to—to watch for any wagon-train or party that may be passing, that I may join them and go far away from here. I care not whither, so leave me to myself, please, as you are not wanted, any of you."

"I am sorry to hear you talk so, Carl, for we all like you at the ranch, and father sent your money to you, if you do not care to go back."

"Here it is."

"I will not touch it—yes, I will, too, for it is mine, and I may need it, and money is my only friend now."

He grasped the roll of bills as he spoke, and without counting them, thrust them into his pocket.

"There are ninety dollars there, Carl; count it," said Dick.

"No, it is all right, boy; but now tell me, Buckskin Charlie, if I am to be left alone, or dogged!" and the Mad Cowboy turned to Buck-

skin Charlie, who had stood by in silence, and answered serenely:

"I have no orders to dog you, Carl, and having found you, and given you your money, I do not believe Dick has other business with you."

"Then I am to be left to go my way in peace?"

"How is it, Dick?"

"I wish Carl would go back with us."

"So do I, for he'll never find squarer pards than we are to him, all at the ranch."

"Come, Carl, return with us to the ranch."

"Never! I have decided what I shall do, so leave me if you want peace, for it shall be war if you dog me, I promise you that."

"I prefer peace, Carl," said Buckskin Charlie, with a laugh, and holding out his hand, he continued:

"Good-by, Carl, as you will have it so, and I hope you'll not get yourself into trouble."

"It is my own lookout if I do," was the surly response.

"Good-by, Carl," and Dick also held forth his hand.

But, like Buckskin Charlie's, it was refused, and turning upon his heel, the Mad Cowboy faced up the trails.

"Come, Dick," said Buckskin Charlie, and the two walked away together.

"Dick?"

"Yes."

"He will follow us."

"Yes."

"We must start back on the trail for home."

"But the stranger, Charlie?"

"There are three trails, Dick, and we must let Carl believe that we have started for the ranch; but the moment it is night, while two keep on, should he still follow, three of us must make a circuit and strike the trails some miles beyond the pass and camp on them until the stranger comes along, and whichever one meets him, must guide him to the ranch."

"A good plan, Charlie; but we must not start back until late, so as not to go very far."

"No, we'll leave a short while before night."

"But suppose the stranger should come along to-day?"

"That would be bad; but still, Carl will be watching us and not the trails, and he would hardly dare shoot him with us so near."

"I believe you are right, Charlie; but since I have seen Mad Carl I am more anxious about the stranger."

"Yes, for if Carl Grafton is not a madman, I never saw one."

"I've been in love myself, and had it bad, but his is the very worst case I ever saw."

"Why, he thought you were alone and meant to kill you, for I saw it in his face, and sobowed myself."

"Then he would have gotten rid of both of us, if he could, only I let him know others were near."

"I tell you, Dick, he is determined to kill that rival of his."

"Did you notice he said he was watching for wagon-trains to come along, so he could go far away, when any train coming would not appear in the direction he was guarding?"

"No, he is there to kill his rival, and that alone; but we must thwart him in some way, Dick, if—"

"If what, Charlie?" asked Dick as the cowboy captain paused.

"If we have to kill him, Dick, for Mad Carl is too wild and desperate a man to be allowed to run at large when we know just what he means to do."

"I like Carl, and would be sorry to see him killed; but I guess you are right about it, Charlie," said Dick thoughtfully.

"Yes, the stranger must not be shot down by that madman, for it would break the Lariat Queen's heart to have her lover slain, for she is one to love with her whole heart and soul, Dick," responded Buckskin Charlie.

CHAPTER XII.

LYING IN WAIT.

"WELL, pard, we found him," cried Buckskin Charlie as he approached the camp with Dick.

"Whar was he, Cap'n Charlie?" asked Larry Kane.

"Over in the canyon."

"What doing?"

"He said he was waiting for a train to come along to join it, and go far from us."

"Then he has soured on us, cap'n?"

"It would seem so."

"He wouldn't come with you?"

"No."
"And he's not the man to fetch along against his will?"

"Not exactly; but now we are to rest here until later in the afternoon, and then start for the ranch," said Dick, and he made no further explanation than this.

It was just an hour before sunset that the party mounted their horses and went on the back trail.

Both Buckskin Charlie and Dick kept a bright lookout in their rear, and at last the boy whispered:

"He's following, Charlie."

"I knew he would; but where did you see him?"

"He rode up to the top of the hill and looked over for an instant."

"Well, he'll come on until sure that we have really returned to the ranch."

"Charlie?"

"Well, Dick?"

"I do hope that Captain Lillie won't come along before we can get into our places on the trails, to warn him."

"I hope so, Dick; but did you say *Captain Lillie*?"

Dick's face flushed at the slip of the tongue he had made.

"Yes, that is his name, I may as well tell you."

"Ah! it is the brother of the Lariat Queen, then, and I was wrong in supposing it to be her lover."

"If Carl knew this, I do not think he would be so madly jealous and murderous."

Dick was silent, for he could not say that it was not Mary's brother, and he was willing to let Buckskin Charlie go off on this false trail.

"Well, she comes of a fighting race, if she is Gordon Lillie's sister, Dick, for I know a good deal about him."

"He is captain now of a company of Pawnee scouts working for the Government, and they have made him white chief of the tribe for his saving them from being massacred by the Sioux."

"He's a young man, but game as a buffalo bull at bay, and he's a terror to the outlaws on the border."

"If he had half a chance he could take care of himself even against Mad Carl, for he is quick as a flash, a perfect plainsman, and shoots to kill when he pulls trigger."

"So you know him, then?"

"I have met him, Dick, but know much of him, and if half the stories they tell of Gordon Lillie are true, it will be a bad day for Mad Carl when he finds out he is tracking him; but it is too dark to see far back on the trail now, so you had better go on with one of the men ahead, while three of us drop out to go back on the trails."

"I am going to take one of the trails, Charlie, so send Joe and Larry on to the ranch."

"You take a big risk, Dick."

"I am willing to take it, Charlie."

"Well, it will be you, Barney and myself that take the trails?"

"Yes."

"Pards, come closer," called out Charlie, and the others did so.

"Our Boy Captain has something to say to you, pards," Buckskin Charlie said.

"Yes, I want you, Larry, and Joe, to ride on slowly back to the ranch, and do not halt, for if Carl is following he must think all five of us are on the trail."

"When you reach the ranch, tell father that the rest of us are behind on the trail, to see just what Mad Carl intends to do."

"You, Barney, will go with Buckskin Charlie and myself."

The men seemed surprised at this, for it told them that something was behind this trailing of Mad Carl.

But Larry and Joe rode on, and the other three quietly turned aside in a clump of timber before reaching the prairie country.

They rode rapidly, and having gotten some distance from the trail, Buckskin Charlie said:

"Barney, Captain Vail is expecting a visitor, and he is about due now, and we want you to flank around and reach the river trail about half a dozen miles from where we found Mad Carl."

"You will camp there and head the gentleman off, and I may as well tell you that it is Captain Gordon Lillie."

"The white chief of the Pawnees?"

"Yes, and you are to guide him to the ranch by another trail than the one we took to the pass."

"I understand, and will be on the watch for him, Cap'n Charlie."

"All right, so get to your post as soon as you

can, and be on the watch at the first glimmer of dawn."

"Dick takes the middle trail and I will go on the one to the West, so that the three will be guarded."

"I'm off," said Barney and the three divided, Buckskin Charlie not at all liking to have Dick go alone upon a mission that might prove to be one of greatest peril, for he knew that if Mad Carl suspected their game, he would take each trail separately to wipe them out, and so he warned the young scout to be on the alert and if he saw Carl to at once get out of his way.

"If I see him first, Charlie, we will be about on even terms," was the plucky response of the daring boy, and yet this did not relieve the anxiety felt by Buckskin Charlie at the boy's danger.

As for Barney he gave him no instructions as to what to do should he meet Mad Carl.

He was a man and must be governed by circumstances, and Barney was not one to be ridden over.

Then too he had selected Barney as the best man for the work, as he knew that he and Mad Carl were not the best of friends, while both Larry and Joe were devoted to their former chief.

So the three parted, and by dawn they were in position and lying in wait for the coming of Gordon Lillie, and each one had selected a most advantageous spot to command the respective trails they had to overlook.

CHAPTER XIII.

PAWNEE BILL, THE WHITE CHIEF.

It was a picturesque scene, a camp of Indian scouts, situated in a valley and upon the banks of a clear, swiftly flowing stream.

There were no tents there to dot the scene, only the camp-fires of the red scout's around each of which were groups of "Indian cavalry" gathered, talking in low tones, while their ponies were staked out upon a level meadow, with a sentinel to watch and guard them.

Under the shelter of a large tree upon the banks of the stream was spread a woven blanket of Mexican make, and near it was a saddle and bridle richly mounted with silver.

Upon the saddle-horn was a lariat of great length and a rifle leant against the tree.

Half reclining upon the blanket, his back leaning against the tree, was a young man who held command over this band of a hundred braves, the Red-skin Rangers of Uncle Sam's army.

The Indians were in buckskin dress, yet wore the sombrero and cavalry boots of the pale-faces, while they were armed with carbines and revolvers.

Altogether they were a wild-looking lot, and a dangerous band to meet on the war-trail.

Their chief was strangely boyish in appearance, about the medium height, and with a sinewy form, graceful and quick in every movement.

He was dressed in cavalry boots coming above his knees, and massive spurs of the Mexican pattern adorned the heels.

He wore buckskin trousers, fringed down the center seams, and a blue fatigue-jacket, with a captain's straps upon the shoulders.

A red sash encircled his waist, and a sword hung to the hilt of his saddle, while in his belt were a pair of handsome revolvers.

Upon his head was a black sombrero, encircled by a gold cord and looped up upon one side with a pin representing an Indian arrow and tomahawk crossed, and in red coral.

The face of the young chief was a striking one, for it was intelligent, frank and fearless, the features being well molded and strongly indicative of character.

His blue eyes were full of fire, and his long, curling blonde hair fell below his shoulders, almost down to his belt.

And this young pale-face captain of red scouts was Gordon W. Lillie, the white chief of the Pawnees, who idolized their youthful leader, and were ready to follow him to death if he gave the word.

He was reading a novel as he rested there upon his blanket, but was upon his feet in an instant as a warning note was sounded from one of the sentinels guarding the ponies.

Instantly all were on the alert, each warrior seizing his saddle and bridle and running toward his individual pony, while a shrill call from the young captain's lips brought a large roan that was not staked out, at a gallop toward his master.

"Ah! a false alarm after all, comrade," said Gordon Lillie, as he saw the Indian sentinel who

had given the alarm, now signal that there was no cause for danger.

A few moments after a horseman dashed into sight, coming at a rapid run toward the spot where Pawnee Bill, for so the white chief was known on the border, stood awaiting him.

It was an Indian courier, a Pawnee, and his pony showed that he had been pressed hard.

He threw himself from his horse as he drew himself to a halt, and said in the Pawnee tongue, as he extended an official-looking paper:

"Flying Cloud brings talking-paper to white chief."

"When did the Flying Cloud leave headquarters?" asked Pawnee Bill, in the Pawnee language, which he spoke perfectly.

"When night came."

"The Flying Cloud has ridden well."

"Let him rest."

The Indian turned and led his horse away, while Pawnee Bill broke open the official envelope.

"Ah! the general has granted me a month's leave, so I will start at once for Texas, leaving Chief Death Face in command."

Placing his hands to his lips he gave a peculiar call, and from one of the groups of Indians, who had returned to their camp-fires when they saw that there was no danger to be dreaded, a warrior advanced toward the white chief.

He was a man of large stature, upright and muscular, and in his sombrero were stuck the eagle-feathers denoting that he was a chief.

His face was a bold one, yet cunning, merciless, and in anger savage, showing that his name was not wrongly bestowed—Death Face.

He approached Pawnee Bill with a dignified air, and gave a by no means awkward military salute.

"I have news from the big white captain, Chief Death Face," said Pawnee Bill.

The Indian made no reply, showed no curiosity, and Pawnee Bill continued:

"I am to go away for a moon, and the Death Face is to command in my place."

Still no answer, no motion whatever showing upon the face of the chief.

"The Death Face will move his camps every few days, keep a watch for any movements of the foes of his people and the pale-faces, and send a courier to the big white captain to tell him all he may discover."

"The Death Face understands."

For the first time the Indian spoke, and his voice was serious and decided:

"The Death Face will obey his white chief."

"I will go alone, and in one moon, will return, so have your trails marked then for me to find you."

"The Death Face hears," was the reply, and calling to his horse which was near, Pawnee Bill saddled and bridled him, and rode away from among his Pawnee soldiers to start upon the trail to far-away Paradise Ranch.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LARIAT QUEEN ON THE TRAIL.

THE two cowboys, Larry and Joe, went on their way homeward thoroughly convinced that something was going on which they were kept in the dark about.

"I say, Larry, that is some underhand work a-going on, sure as shootin'!" said Joe.

"It does look that way, Pard Joe."

"I tell yer that Mad Carl didn't leave ther ranch without some good reason for his gittin'."

"What do you think was his reason?"

"Waal, it looks to me as though he had been putting his foot into other folks' business, or we would never have been sent after him."

"Why didn't Buckskin Charlie bring him, after he found him?"

"I don't know."

"And he and Dick kept up a mighty peert looking behind 'em, after we started."

"Yes, they did."

"And now they have gone with Barney off on some chase."

"That's so, and I can't understand it all."

"Well, we'll soon see what the boss thinks of it," was the answer.

It was late at night when the two men arrived at the ranch, and they concluded to go to bed and make their report in the morning, and this they did.

Captain Vail was an early riser, and soon after sun-up he saw them coming from the cowboy camps, and he knew them as having gone with Dick, so hastened toward them, fearing some harm had befallen his boy.

But to his anxious inquiry he learned that Dick and the others were all right, and hoped to return soon.

"You saw Mad Carl then?" asked the captain.

"No, sir, we did not, but Buckskin Charlie and Dick saw him."

"Do you know where they found him?"

"He was over in the pass, camped there and waiting for a wagon train going west, which they said he meant to join."

"I see, and they sent you back?"

"Yes, sir."

Captain Vail pondered over the affair and when his wife and May Lillie came down to breakfast he told them the situation as he understood it.

"And what is your idea, Captain Vail?" asked May Lillie somewhat anxiously.

"Well, Dick and Buckskin Charlie saw Mad Carl, and they found him at the pass, and from there the three trails northward branch off."

"Now three remained behind, and there are three trails, so that they must each one be on the watch on one of them."

"But Dick has undertaken too perilous a work, I fear, sir, should Mad Carl happen to go his way and find him watching him," said May.

"Oh, Dick is wide awake, and he is a Texas born boy, Miss May, so can take care of himself, never fear."

"And he is cool and fearless," added Mrs. Vail, who also held perfect confidence in her young son's ability to look out for Number One.

"I wish I could feel as you do, my good friends; but somehow I fear that Mad Carl will be as merciless as death to all whom he may come in contact with."

"Well, Miss May, if they do not put in an appearance to-morrow I will take half a dozen of the boys and go after them."

"And more, I shall give Mad Carl to understand that we know just why he is camping on the trail, and that he must go, or take the consequences."

"I like the fellow, and would hate to have to bring him to bay, but I will do so if he does not leave this part of the country," and the determined manner of Captain Vail showed that he meant all that he said.

After breakfast May Lillie went to her room, an anxious look upon her face.

"There must be no bloodshed if I can help it," she mused, half-aloud.

"I am the innocent cause of the trouble, and it is my duty to act."

"Yes, and I will, for I cannot bear that little Dick shall be exposed to the merciless hatred of that madman, for madman I now believe he is."

"I will go myself and see Mad Carl."

"I will ride directly to the pass, and if he dares tell me again that he means to make me suffer through his taking Gordon's life, then he must take the consequences."

"He shall answer to me for this, and, though Heaven forbid that I should take his life, it is his life or Gordon's, and my whole future at stake as well."

"I will go at once."

She made certain preparations for her going, having decided upon her course, and then quietly slipped out of the house to the stables.

She soon had her horse saddled, and mounting rode away in a direction that prevented her from being seen from the house.

Among the many fine animals belonging to Captain Vail she had selected the best one, as she knew, for speed and endurance.

She had not gone unprepared for her journey either, for she had taken from the pantry a loaf of bread, a piece of cold meat and a tin cup.

She also had looked well to her repeating-rifle and revolvers, loading them afresh, and had taken a *serape* and strapped it behind her saddle, as she was not sure she would not have to remain away all night, for she had determined to carry out her plan to the bitter end, and time and again muttered to herself:

"Yes, it is his life or Gordon's, and he drives me to do as I am determined to do."

Once she had gotten out of sight of the cabin, without being seen by any one, she urged her horse into a swinging gallop along the trail.

CHAPTER XV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

ONCE she was started upon her mission, to protect Gordon Lillie, and also to save young Dick Vail and others from the merciless fury of Carl the Mad Cowboy, May Lillie rode on at a swift and steady gallop.

She had chosen her horse well, and the animal's steady gait threw the miles behind him at a rapid rate, while he seemed untiring, her light weight seeming not to distress him in the least.

She followed the trail she had taken before

with Dick, and now well marked by the tracks of the boy and his companions, as well as those of the horses taken with him by Carl the Mad Cowboy.

Arriving at the river where the trail branched westward and northward, she halted for her horse to rest and get a bite of grass and some water, while she ate her frugal lunch, washing it down with a tin-cup of water.

A rest of little over half an hour found her again in the saddle, riding at the same steady gallop.

"I will reach the pass before sunset some time, and Heaven grant I may not be too late," she murmured.

She felt sure that Dick, Buckskin Charlie and Barney were guarding the trails beyond the pass, and that they must be some distance away from where Carl the Cowboy had ambushed himself to await his victims' coming.

She had made up her mind what her course should be.

She did not fear death at the hand of Carl, after his threat to her, so she determined to boldly search him out and face him.

Once they were face to face she would be governed by his further threats as to what she should do, and she would be prepared to act.

"I do not wish to kill him," she muttered over and over again; but her face showed that her mind was made up to meet the worst as it would be necessary to meet it.

At last the lofty hilltops that overhung the pass came in sight, and she knew that a ride of several more miles would fetch her there.

She knew the pass, for she had been guided through there by the Mad Cowboy himself, after he had rescued the train from the Comanches, and volunteered to escort her to Paradise Ranch when he discovered that Captain Vail's was her destination.

In sight of the hills overhanging the canyon the wagon-train had been attacked, and Carl the Cowboy had saved her and the others from a fearful fate.

Now she was going almost to the very spot to save the life of her husband, if she had to kill the man to whom she owed it that she had not been slain.

"It seems a cruel destiny, but I must not shrink from it," she said as she rode nearer to the canyon.

The sun was yet an hour high when she entered the canyon to suddenly behold Carl the Mad Cowboy before her!

He had just entered the canyon from a gulch, and started with a surprise that showed he was completely taken aback by her presence.

She, too, was somewhat startled, though he was the very one she was in search of.

But his act was more startling still. The Mad Cowboy threw his rifle to his shoulder and held the Lariat Queen covered, while he shouted:

"Hands up, May Lillie, or I will shoot you as I would a panther!"

The man was not fifty feet from her, and his expression was one of unfeigned frenzy.

That he meant all that he then said she knew, and to attempt to herself draw a weapon would be madness.

So she obeyed his command, hoping to act promptly and well if she could catch him off his guard for an instant.

"Hands up, May Lillie, or die!" he shouted a second time, seeing her hesitation, and up above her head she raised her hands.

"Who is with you?" he demanded, advancing nearer.

His question seemed to convince her that he had deemed her not alone, and hence his act to protect himself by making her captive, should be find that he was being hunted.

Believing that if he knew that she was alone he would not fear her, and thus give her a chance to turn the tables upon him, the Lariat Queen said:

"I am all alone, Carl the Cowboy, and I came here to seek you."

"And you have found me?" he sneered.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"May I talk to you, Carl, or will you refuse to hear me?"

"I would hear all that you have to say when I clip your claws."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that you are as dangerous as a catamount, and I believe came here to kill me."

"Here!"

He seized her hands, now, in his grasp, and bending them together drew from the saddle-horn her lariat and began to bind them securely.

"Would you thus treat a woman, Carl?" she asked, reproachfully.

"Yes, when that woman came here to kill me."

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"I shall bind you securely to your saddle and then send you home, when you have heard what I have to tell you."

"Where is your manhood to treat me thus, Carl Grafton?"

"How have you treated me, girl?"

"I have never wronged you, Carl."

"You taught me to love you, with your accursed eyes and pretty ways, and now I hate you, and shall prove that hatred by what I tell you."

"What have you to tell me?" she demanded thoroughly alarmed by his look and words.

"That the one you love is my prisoner, May Lillie," was the savage rejoinder of the Mad Cowboy.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RELEASE.

THE words uttered by the Mad Cowboy went deep into the heart of the poor girl.

But in an instant she recovered herself and said with forced calmness:

"You do not speak the truth, sir."

"I do."

"I say that you do not."

He laughed in a vindictive way and asked:

"What proof have you that I do not speak the truth?"

His words gave her hope, and she said quickly:

"You say that Gordon Lillie is your captive?"

"Yes, as you are."

"And I say that is not so."

"Your proof?"

"My proof is that a man cannot be in two places at the same time."

"Do you refer to the man known as Pawnee Bill, when you speak of Gordon Lillie?" he asked with sudden earnestness.

"Yes, he is called Pawnee Bill by the soldiers."

"That is the man who is my captive."

"Where is he?"

"Up the gulch yonder at my camp."

"I do not believe you."

"I tell you the truth, for I captured him here."

"I threw my lariat over him and his horse sprung forward dragging him from the saddle, so I was able to capture him without much trouble."

"I will believe you, Carl the Madman, when you allow me to see him."

"See here, do you not behold that spot which shows where a body has fallen?" and he pointed to the ground a few paces away.

"And there is my lariat still tied to that little tree, from where I threw the noose."

Her face paled as she saw the marks on the ground, and the lariat, but she still held hope as he did not seem willing to show her his captive and she said:

"I still do not believe you, for Gordon Lillie is not one to tamely submit even to a man of your desperate character."

"I admit he is a dangerous one to handle, but he is my captive, and I came back here to get my lariat, when I saw you."

"Seeing is believing, Carl Grafton."

He bit his lips savagely but answered:

"You will believe without seeing, and I mean that you shall know that he is in my power."

"I do not intend to take his life now, but to kill him by inches, to let him believe that you are in my power and to torture him to death, in fact."

"You I will let go free, and you can live to feel what it is to win my revenge by slighting my love."

"Come, you must return now, for your horse will take you back, bound as you are."

"My God! can you speak the truth?" cried May Lillie, her heart wrung with anguish.

"I do, and I will tell you that I was hiding in the tree when you told that boy Dick of your marriage, and I heard all."

"I heard how he became your ally to save Pawnee Bill from my revenge, and the boy shall feel my revenge too, May Lillie, mark my words, for I shall strike deep."

"You came here to see me, and your errand is accomplished, so go!"

"Go and tell Captain Vail what I have told you, that my revenge shall fall upon his boy for tracking me; yes, and upon Buckskin Charlie, too, and every man who came here yesterday upon my trail, for I will know who they are."

"Now, be gone, and know that I hate you as I do a viper, but I will not kill you as I would one that barred my way, for I wish you to live and suffer—do you hear, live and suffer as one

who loves as you can love must suffer, knowing what you do now."

Her head was bowed now, she could not utter a word, or move, as she felt his strong hands wrapping the lariat about her waist and making it fast to her saddle.

In her breast was a hope, a faint one, that as he would not allow her to see his prisoner he did not tell her the truth about having Gordon Lillie in his power.

He may have captured some one, perhaps, she thought with horror, it was poor little Dick, but she could not believe that it was Pawnee Bill, and this hope alone sustained her.

Suddenly, as he finished his work, she said with intense earnestness:

"Mad Carl the Cowboy, if you do speak the truth, if you have my husband in your power, and intend to carry out your threat against him, and others too, to make me suffer, to avenge yourself on me because I do not love you, I vow to you before Heaven that I will seek a revenge upon you that will be as fiendish as even your evil heart and devilish brain can think of!"

A demoniacal laugh followed this threat of the Lariat Queen, and without another word the Mad Cowboy turned the head of May Lillie's horse back the way she had come, and struck him a sharp blow that made him bound away with a frightened snort and go at a run out of the canyon, his fair rider bound securely in her saddle.

A wild yell broke from the lips of Mad Carl, as the horse sped away, and then followed a laugh almost fiendish in its triumphant hatred and viciousness.

He watched the horse and rider until they were out of sight, and then strode away up through the narrow gulch out of which he had come into the canyon, when so unexpectedly coming face to face with the Lariat Queen.

It was yet half an hour before nightfall, and as he walked along, he said, aloud:

"Now I must get away from here, for there must be no tracking me to my lair."

CHAPTER XVII.

A FLIGHT FOR LIFE.

WHEN the horse rushed away with May Lillie, her first thought was one of thankfulness at being freed from the power of the man whom she now began to hate most bitterly, for all gratitude at his having saved her from death once, was now destroyed by his mad and inhuman conduct toward her because she could not love him, and had frankly told him that she was the wife of another.

Away sped the horse through the valley, keeping up a speed which his rider knew could not last for many miles.

So she determined to try and check him by her voice.

Her bonds were galling her wrists, the rapid motion of the horse making it most painful to her.

So she spoke in a low, soothing tone to the horse, and at last he began to heed, the fright he had received leaving him, until he came down to a canter, then a trot, and later a walk.

She was glad to feel that she was at last free from the pain caused by his running, and yet she was most anxious to reach her home, that Captain Vail might learn all that had occurred to her.

The sun went down and the shadows of night fell upon the prairie.

But the horse held to the trail unerringly, stopped here and there to drink at a stream, and then continued on in his long, swinging walk.

The darkness seemed intense to May Lillie, though the stars shone brightly in a cloudless sky.

The crickets chirped in the prairie grass, a coyote yelped afar off, or the long-drawn-out howl of a wolf was heard, rendering the scene most desolate indeed.

With her arms freed May Lillie would not have felt the desolation and solitude of her situation, for she had been too often alone on the prairie and in the wilderness to dread it.

But, after all that had happened, and in her doubt, dread and anxiety, while also being bound to her saddle tested her nerve in the extreme.

Thus the time passed on until at last the eastern sky grew luminous with the coming of the morn.

It seemed to give her cheer at first, and yet it was not long that its silvery light had spread over the prairie before it revealed to her that she was not alone.

She was being followed by foes that could become most deadly did the chance offer.

They were wolves!

A large pack of the hungry brutes trotted along behind her, creeping nearer and nearer, and seeming to realize with brute instinct that her horse was tired, and she bound and helpless.

The horse had been going along at a walk, seemingly asleep, for his gait was so steady his head lowered until, suddenly, a sharp yelp, almost at his heels, caused him to start with fright.

As he did so the pack gave a chorus of fierce yelps, and the horse sprang away in terror now.

The pack started in pursuit, for they held no fear of a flying horse and frightened rider. Flight proved that the rider feared them, and so they rushed on in pursuit, ravenous for the anticipated feast of human flesh.

Away sped the terrified horse over the moonlit prairie, his fair rider bound securely to her saddle, while with a rush came the hungry wolves in hot chase, seemingly sure of their human game.

"Heaven have mercy upon me now!" cried the bound Lariat Queen. She forgot her pain of the bonds now, and only urged her horse on the faster.

But her voice was not heeded or needed, for those angry yelps at his heels added terror to his flight and he strained every nerve and sinew in the mad chase for life.

Afar off on the prairie suddenly appeared dark forms, and soon after the glimmer of a light flashed upon the eyes of May Lillie.

The light was the beacon of hope in the cabin home of Captain Vail, and the dark forms loomed up as horsemen.

They beheld the flying horse and rider, heard the yelping pack and urged their animals forward to a run.

A moment after they recognized that it was May Lillie, for they were a party of the Cowboy Rangers, then on search for her.

Like a flash she went by them, and their revolvers sent the pursuing wolves flying away in terror.

Then they turned and started after the fugitive, for the horse had not checked his speed, his terror being too great.

On, on he sped for the beacon light ahead, and the cowboys came after at a run which gained on the tired animal ridden by May Lillie.

As the horse ran up to the stockade fence the cowboys dashed up, and they beheld the situation of the fair rider.

More nearly dead than alive she was released from her bonds and borne by tender hands into the cabin where she was met by Mrs. Vail and the captain.

A glass of liquor revived her, and in a few words she told what had happened to her, all that Carl, the Mad Cowboy had done and said.

"I went to see if I could not save Dick and the others, to see what I could do with Mad Carl, to take his life if need be before others should die and suffer through him, and I found him at the pass."

Then followed her story of her sufferings, and Captain Vail told her that he had sent the cowboys in search of her, when night came and she did not return.

"And now," he added; "you go to bed and rest, and I will go with my men to seek this fiendish man and see if his story be true."

Ten minutes after Captain Vail rode away from the ranch accompanied by half a dozen of his brave Cowboy Rangers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE WAR-TRAIL.

THE cowboys had heard from Captain Vail, as they rode along, the story of all that the Lariat Queen had gone through, and much as they had admired Carl the Mad Cowboy, they were now determined to resent most bitterly his inhuman and unmanly treatment of the beautiful girl whom they all so highly regarded.

"We'll string him up for that work," said one.

"He shan't live to say his prayers," another remarked.

"He ought to be hanged by his heels!"

"No, that's too good for him, pards, for he ought to be staked out on the prairies and left to coyotes to chew on!"

"That's so!"

And other remarks were made of a like tenor until Larry remarked quietly:

"Its catching before hanging, pards."

"Well, Larry, he will only have a night's start of us, and as he has three horses and a pack-mule, and a prisoner too, we certainly should overtake him," Captain Vail said.

"Yes, and he may have run upon Buckskin Charlie, Dick or Barney," a cowboy suggested.

"How did the stranger get through without their seeing him?" was asked.

"The stranger, men, is Captain Gordon Lillie, know as Pawnee Bill, and I may as well tell you is Miss May's husband, for she married him over a year ago."

"He was on his way to my ranch, and as Mad Carl knew of it, being refused by Miss May as a matter of course, he decided upon revenge."

"That is the situation in a nutshell," the captain explained.

"Well, I don't believe he has Pawnee Bill a prisoner, from all I have heard of that young fellow," a cowboy said.

"Well, we will know soon," and so on they went riding at a brisk pace and arriving at the pass just after dawn.

They found the situation there just as May Lillie had described it, for there were the marks upon the ground, and the scar on the tree made by the lariat when drawn taut, which showed that Mad Carl had lassoed some one, or something right there.

Looking upon the ground searchingly, one of the cowboys discovered a red stain.

"Mad Carl caught some one with his lariat, and hurt him, too, for that is a blood-stain," said Larry.

"We will go up to his camp now, and I wish three of you to go up the trails and bring in Buckskin Charlie, Barney and my boy," the captain said.

"If they are there," suggested Joe.

"If they are not there, where are they?"

As no one could answer this question, the only means of finding a solution was to go after the three persons still supposed to be on their posts of duty waiting to warn the expected stranger of his danger.

"We will wait at Mad Carl's camp," Captain Vail said, and they rode away up the gulch toward the camp of the Mad Cowboy, while three of the men started off on the trails after Buckskin Charlie and the others.

The camp of the Mad Cowboy was found, but deserted.

The ashes of the fire were yet aglow with coals, but the trail, made after dew-fall, was visible going down the valley toward the river.

The cowboys staked out their horses and began to prepare breakfast, for the Cowboy Rangers never went on a trail unless well provided with provisions, and though Captain Vail was perfectly calm, there was no doubt but that he was anxious for the return of the three men sent out on the different trails.

His brave boy might, or might not, be living, and had he met the Mad Cowboy, the captain felt sure that Carl would be relentless toward Dick as he would toward any man who barred his way.

From the direction the trail of Cowboy Carl took, it seemed that he had gone toward the Rio Grande, and the ranchero anxiously awaited the report of several of the herd-trailers among his men, to see what report they would bring in.

It was not very long before Den Ross came in, and it was evident that he had made some discovery of importance, for he walked straight up to where Captain Vail was pacing to and fro, watching the men get breakfast.

Den Ross was known to be an old Indian-fighter, and it was said he could follow any trail ever left by red-skins.

Upon reaching the camp of the Mad Cowboy, Den Ross, after staking out his horse had picked up the trail leading down the valley, and followed it for half a mile.

When he returned, Captain Vail asked anxiously:

"Well, Ross, what have you found out?"

"Mad Carl had three horses with him and a pack mule, did he not, Pard Cap'n?"

"Yes."

"Well, he left this camp with four horses and ther mule."

"That means that he had one extra?"

"It does, and the extra one were ther same animile thet come inter ther canyon and got lassoed."

"Ah! then he did have a prisoner after all?"

"He had the horse, that is sart'in, but whether thar was a rider on his back remains to be discovered."

"We must make a thorough search after breakfast."

"Yas, cap'n, fer a dead body or a grave."

"If we do not find either, then this one he lariatied is with him?"

"A prisoner, sure, sir."

"If he is in that man's power, and should turn

out to be Captain Lillie, then he had better be dead."

"That's about the size of it, cap'n; but here comes one o' ther men, and it is Barney that's with him."

As Den Ross spoke, the cowboy sent on the trail taken by Barney came in sight, and that individual accompanied him.

As he reached the camp a shout told of the coming of others, and another of the messengers appeared in sight and with him was Buckskin Charlie.

"My God! can my poor boy have been the one to suffer?" cried Captain Vail.

His question was answered by the appearance of the third messenger sent off on the trail, and he was alone!

"My brave boy is not with him," said Captain Vail, and his face turned deadly pale.

CHAPTER XIX. MISSING.

A SILENCE that was painful fell upon the group of cowboys, at the words of Captain Vail.

Then came the messengers sent upon the trails.

Barney accompanied one, Buckskin Charlie was with another, but the third man was returning alone.

He had certainly been to the post of duty taken by Dick, and yet he had not found him.

The Mad Cowboy had gone and with him a prisoner.

Could that prisoner have been Dick?

Captain Vail recalled that May Lillie had said the Mad Cowboy told her he had overheard her plot with little Dick, and he had not let his vengeance fall upon the boy?

If the prisoner he claimed to have was Pawnee Bill, why did he not let May Lillie have proof of it?

"No, his prisoner must have been Dick," said the ranchero with deep feeling.

Barney was the first to arrive, and to eager questioning he could give no news of Dick.

He had gone to his post on the trail and waiting, had seen no one until recalled by the messenger cowboy sent by Captain Vail to recall him.

Buckskin Charlie was the next to arrive.

He too had taken his watch upon the trail, and no one had passed.

He was growing anxious when the messenger came for him.

Then came the messenger sent after Dick.

He had gone along the trail until he had found the place where Dick had taken up his position to watch for the coming of Pawnee Bill.

There were the tracks of his horse, where he had been staked out, and the trail of the animal led back toward the pass, until it was lost upon the hard ground of the canyon.

The men looked at each other in a questioning way, and it seemed that but one thought was in the brain of each.

They all felt that Dick had tired of his post and long wait, came on to the pass and been captured and carried off by Carl the Cowboy.

It certainly looked that way in the face of the information they had.

So Den Ross was sent to the post held by Dick, with orders to make what discoveries he could, and two of the men were put upon the trail of Mad Carl, with orders to mark it well so that the others could follow rapidly.

Then all the others could only rest and wait, while Den Ross was gone upon his errand.

Captain Vail and Buckskin Charlie had breakfast in silence, and then walked apart for a talk together.

"Buckskin Charlie, I wish to tell you the whole affair, so that you can understand the situation," said the captain.

Buckskin Charlie made no reply, and the ranchero made known the story of May Lillie.

"They were quietly married by the chaplain of the fort, and, anxious to help her husband, who was sent off at once upon a long expedition, May took the position of governess in my family, the chaplain, an old friend of mine, urging it, and a good salary tempting her, while she would also have a pleasant home until she and her husband could get one of their own.

"Of course, only the conceit and hopes of that fellow Mad Carl led him to believe May Lillie loved him, as her gratitude and kindness were mistaken for love by him, while, not knowing of her marriage, I too felt that she might marry him, though my wife saw that her regard was only friendship for him.

"As the best thing to do when he urged her to become his wife, she told him the truth and it transformed him into a veritable demon.

"She had reformed him, redeemed him from his desperate career, as you know, and when he found that he could not win her it maddened him, making him as revengeful as an Indian.

"He has vowed vengeance against her, and to make her suffer lay in wait to kill her husband, Pawnee Bill, while he has placed upon the list of his victims my boy Dick, you and those who came here after him, he said, and whose names he would find out.

"May Lillie boldly came here to meet him and accept the result, and she was bound to her horse by him and thus sent home.

"He claimed to have her husband a prisoner, yet gave her no proof, but said he meant to torture him to death.

"Now a prisoner he did have, and the question is, was it Pawnee Bill or was it Dick?

"Now, Buckskin Charlie, you know all the facts, so what is to be done?"

Buckskin Charlie had listened with the deepest attention to the story told by the ranchero.

He smiled as he saw how well he had ferreted out the situation, and at last, in response to the question of Captain Vail, answered in his quick, decided way:

"The only thing to be done, Captain Vail, is to run Mad Carl down and hang him."

"You believe it can be done?"

"Yes, sir; for how can he cover his trail so that we can not follow him?"

"He has a night's start."

"True, sir, but we must start as soon as Den Ross returns."

"We will; but what do you think about his prisoner?"

"I will know if it is Dick, sir, as soon as I see the tracks of his horse."

"And if not Dick?"

"Then it must be Pawnee Bill."

"And Dick?"

"Leave three men here to search for him, sir, one being sent back to the ranch to see if he has gone home by another trail."

"There comes Den Ross now."

"Well, Ross?" eagerly asked the ranchero.

"Dick left the post, sir, of his own will, and came to the pass here."

"More I does not know," was the answer.

"Take to your saddles, men, for we go on Mad Carl's trail," came the stern command from Captain Vail.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE TOILS.

A HORSEMAN was riding leisurely along the trail leading toward the canyon pass, and his manner and look that of a man who ever on the alert for danger was ready to meet it if it came.

The horseman was Pawnee Bill, the white chief of the Indian cavalry, who had left his command on a month's leave.

He was mounted upon his splendid roan, Comrade, and the horse seemed not at all distressed by the long ride, for Pawnee Bill spared him all in his power, frequently walking along the trail for miles to give him a rest from his weight.

"I ought to reach the settlements this afternoon, and from there can doubtless make my way by nightfall to Captain Vail's ranch," he murmured as he rode along.

"How glad I will be to see my little child wife, and I feel that she will be just as glad to welcome me."

"It was just like her to accept a place as governess, so as to help me, and I am awful glad I made her securely mine by getting the chaplain to marry us, for she has hosts of lovers and I had no idea of losing her."

"I don't blame the lovers, only with so many splendid fellows to jump at the chance of winning her, I was afraid poor me might lose her."

"But I'll soon be with the Lariat Queen, as she writes me they call her down in Texas."

"Well, she is an expert with the lariat, yes, and a dead shot and splendid rider as well."

"I am justly proud of my frontier bride, the Queen of the Lariat."

"Ah! there is the pass she wrote me of, and when I have gone through I will feel that I am near her home."

And so musing the young chief of Indian cavalry rode on into the pass, wholly unmindful that a lurking foe was there.

He was riding leisurely along, his bridle-rein swinging loose, when suddenly his keen ears caught a whirring sound, and while one hand grasped at his rein another got its grip upon a revolver.

He recognized the sound but too well, and was too late to save himself.

Over his head went the noose of a coiled lariat, his startled horse gave a wild bound, the lasso came taut about his body, pinioning his arms close, and he was torn from his saddle with a terrible jerk and fell with great force upon the hard ground.

So heavy was his fall that his head struck a rock, cutting a gash in it and stunning him by the shock, for he lay like one dead.

Then down from the rocks where he had been ambushed sprang a tall form, and loosening the noose he raised his victim in his strong arms and bore him up into the gulch, where with a rope he quickly bound his hands and feet securely.

Then back to the canyon he ran, for he heard Comrade neighing wildly, as the horse had, after his first fright was over, returned to find his master.

Creeping out of the gulch the ambusher seized the rein of the splendid roan and led him quickly away in the direction he had taken his rider. After a short while the ambusher again entered the canyon, coming from the gulch.

It is needless to say that he was Mad Carl the Cowboy.

Just as he stepped out of the gulch into the Canyon Pass, he came face to face with the Queen of the Lariat.

The result of that meeting the reader is already acquainted with.

Mad Carl was merciless, and sent May Lillie away bound to her horse, to very nearly lose her life by being torn to pieces by wolves.

He saw her depart with a mocking laugh, and wild shout of triumph.

Then he turned away from the spot, forgetting to secure his lariat from the tree, and to get which had again brought him from his camp into the pass.

"She did not believe I had her lover a prisoner," he muttered.

"She wanted proof, but I dared not let her see him, for I believe he is dead, as he seems so."

"The fall was a terrible one, and that cut on his head may have crushed his skull."

"Oh, no, if he was dead she would not feel such deep sorrow as to know he was my prisoner and undergoing such torture as I shall visit upon him."

"But now to see if he is alive."

He soon reached his camp, where the horse of Pawnee Bill had been staked out with his own, while his master lay in bonds upon the ground.

"Ah! you are alive then, Pawnee Bill?"

"I feared you were dead," he said in a sneering way, as he saw the eyes of his captive fixed upon him.

"I am alive, yes, but was stunned."

"I thought your purpose was to kill me?" was the low response.

"Oh, no, I hate you too well for that."

"I want you to live and suffer."

"I think I know you now, though my eyes are not quite clear yet."

"Who am I?"

"A murderer hiding from justice, and one whom I once captured and returned to camp; but you escaped."

"Yes, I escaped, and you are right, for I am a murderer, and a fugitive from what you call justice, Pawnee Bill."

"And you waylaid me to get your revenge?"

"Yes, but not revenge for you capturing me."

"Oh, no! you were in the discharge of your duty then and I could forgive you that."

"Then why do you seek revenge?"

"Curse you, Pawnee Bill! You will know soon enough to your cost."

"I do not wish you to die, so will look to your wound, and care for you most tenderly, for I wish you to live to know what my hatred can be."

"Come, I'll put you on your horse and tie you securely."

"Then we will start upon a trail."

"Where will you take me?"

"Wait and see," was the savage response of Mad Carl.

CHAPTER XXI.

AT HIS MERCY.

THE man whom he saw before him, as his captor, Pawnee Bill had every reason to fear from the little he had heard him say.

He had received a very severe shaking up from his fall, and the blow upon his head had cut to the bone, leaving a wound several inches in length.

He felt dizzy and sore, he could see no way of escape, yet he was not one to despair.

He saw that the man had a camp there.

His horses were there, a pack-mule and evi-

dence that he had camped in the spot for some days.

In some way he had learned that he was coming to Paradise Ranch, and so sought revenge upon him for his having once made him a prisoner and carried him back to the fort.

More than this Pawnee Bill could not see in it.

As Carl the Cowboy, Pawnee Bill did not know the man, only as Graf Carlton, as he had called himself at the fort.

When May Lillie had written him that her life had been saved by Carl the Cowboy, Pawnee Bill had never connected him with Graf Carlton.

Now that he was his prisoner, he could only regard him as an outlaw, who knowing of his coming to Texas had sought revenge upon him for the past.

He watched the man move about the camp, and was struck with his splendid appearance, though he feared that his mind was gone when he looked into his frenzied face.

Among Mad Carl's accomplishments was that of understanding something of medicine and surgery, for he had studied both.

His comrades were wont to call him "doctor," as he had a case of surgical instruments and of medicine with him.

He now opened his cases and set to work to dress the wound of his prisoner with a skill that convinced Pawnee Bill that he was in good hands at least, as far as Mad Carl's knowledge of surgery was concerned.

"The bone is not fractured, Pawnee Bill, and I'll stitch up the wound and it will not give you much trouble," he said, and apparently interested in his work he dressed the wound almost tenderly.

Then he placed his prisoner in his saddle, bound his feet securely beneath his horse, and his hands to the saddle-horn.

Having finished this he saddled his own horse, put the pack on the mule and roped his led animals so as to follow.

His next move was to make Pawnee Bill's horse fast to his own saddle animal, after which he said:

"I am ready now, Pawnee Bill, for my ride."

"Whither?"

"Don't be curious, but wait and see."

"I confess to some curiosity to know what you intend to do with me?"

"Where were you going, when I brought you to a halt?" suddenly asked the cowboy.

"To Paradise Ranch."

"What for?"

"Are you interested in knowing?"

"More than you can ever imagine."

"I was going there to visit a lady."

"Your wife?"

"Ah! you know this?"

"Answer me?"

"Yes, my wife."

"May Lillie?"

"Such is her name."

"She is governess in the family of a ranchero?"

"Yes, Captain Vail's family."

"She has been posing as a young girl."

"She is one."

"I mean as an unmarried woman."

"Yes, I know that, and I was surprised that you knew she was my wife, for we were secretly married and it was to remain a secret for a certain while."

"Did you ever hear of Carl Grafton, the cowboy?"

"Ah, yes, he is the noble fellow who saved the train my wife came to Texas with, and thus kept her from falling into the hands of the Comanches."

"You call him a noble fellow?" sneered the cowboy.

"Yes, for my wife wrote me of how he faced big odds to rescue them, and what a noble man he was."

"Well, you may be pleased to know that she has been carrying on a desperate flirtation with Carl the Cowboy."

"You are an infamous liar!" was the quick retort of Pawnee Bill.

"Am I? Well, you'll see."

"I will see not one thing for which I can condemn my wife."

"She may have been friendly, kind to Carl the Cowboy, as naturally she would be; but no more, and I fling the lie in your teeth, bound as I am, when you say that she has been flirting with him."

"She led him on, pretended to love him, and then, when she heard you were coming, coolly told him she was married."

"It is false!"

"It is true, I say."

"You need say no more, for I do not believe a word you utter."

"Well, she broke poor Carl's heart, and he has gone again to the bad."

"He had had a sad life of it, I have heard, having been accused of a murder he did not commit, and so fled from home."

"It made him bitter, desperate, and he became a howling terror even for Texas."

"Then your wife crossed his path and he loved her, changed his whole life, and when he expected to win her love she laughed at him."

"I tell you it made poor Carl a madman, and he has vowed revenge upon her, and upon you as the man who stands between him and his love."

"And so you are Carl the Cowboy?" coolly said Pawnee Bill, though he had listened with deepest interest to the words of his captor.

"Who said so?"

"I know it."

"What if I am?"

"Well, I know you for what you were and are, and such as you could never win the respect of May Lillie."

"You saved her life, yes, and for that she was grateful, as I am."

"You may have won her friendship, but that is all, and all else you assert is but an infamous falsehood."

"I am in your power, so do your worst, Carl the Cowboy."

This bold defiance of him caused the man to turn livid with rage, and he dropped his hand upon his knife-hilt.

But quickly his mood changed and he laughed in a fiendish way.

Then he started to mount his horse, hesitated, and muttered:

"I did not get my lariat, after all, so will go after it, for I will need it." With this he led the way down the hill, halted when he reached the entrance to the canyon, hitched the horses and went on foot toward the pass, just as it was growing dark.

As he entered the pass he saw a horse and rider coming through, and toward him.

Instantly he shrunk back in the shadow of the pass, and awaited his approach.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECOND VICTIM.

WHEN Dick Vail went to take up his duty as sentinel, he felt the importance of his position, and was very proud that he had the opportunity of showing what he could do.

Dick had been in several Indian fights, and chases after Mexican raiders, with the cowboys, and had had his mettle tried fully.

What he had done had given him the name of Daring Dick, and the cowboys had duly christened him as such.

Dick was proud of his achievements and of his name, and now that he was to perform the same work that Buckskin Charlie and Barney were to do, he was most anxious to have it fall to his lot to have Pawnee Bill come his way.

"If he does, I'll not be the one to lead him by a safe way to the fort, any more than will he be the man to go that course."

"I'll take him to where Mad Carl is in ambush, and then we can have it out, for he must be gotten rid of or he'll do Miss May some harm."

So said Dick, and such was his determination when he took up his stand on the trail.

He selected a spot some three miles from the pass, and where a spur of rocks gave him a shelter.

Around these the trail wound, and in the rear was meadow-land through which a brook ran, affording water and grass for his horse.

For himself Dick was well supplied with provisions, and for dessert he had tucked away in his blanket Cooper's novel "The Last of the Mohicans."

Dick pitched his camp in a secluded nook, gathered leaves to soften his couch, wood to make a fire at night and cook his meals, also to give him warmth, for the nights were cool, and with his horse in full view, also a mile or more of the trail, he sat down to his duty as sentinel.

The novel was most interesting, but its very plot kept Dick on the alert, and his eyes were upon the trail every few minutes.

Thus the time passed, the novel was finished, and still Pawnee Bill did not come in sight.

"He has not gone by the other trails, or Buckskin Charlie would have been after me," he muttered, finding considerable consolation in this thought.

One afternoon he happened to give a glance at the meadow, and started as he saw that his horse was gone.

In some way he had pulled up the stake, or he had been stolen by some lurking Indian.

With his pony missing, and perhaps a foe near, Dick was forced to give up sentinel duty at once, and he started off on a scout to find out whether his horse had gotten loose himself or been stolen.

He cautiously crept away from his post, keeping among the rocks, went along the ridge for some distance, and made a flank movement to the timber beyond the meadowland.

He had taken some time to reach the spot, and there, to his joy, saw his pony in an opening beyond, quietly feeding.

He approached him cautiously and managed to catch him with little trouble, for the rope and pin were dragging after him, showing that the horse had gotten free himself in some way.

Mounting his pony, Dick rode him back to his grazing ground, drove the stake deep with a stone, and once more took up his post as sentinel.

He looked up the trail, and saw no one.

Then down toward the pass, and no one met his eye.

But suddenly he started, for just below him in the trail he beheld fresh tracks.

In an instant he was down from his perch and examining them.

"Oh, Lordy! he has gone by, and Mad Carl will kill him," he said in real distress.

The trail was just made, and was that of a shod horse.

The animal was going toward the pass.

Instantly Dick rushed for his pony, led him to his camp and quickly bridled and saddled him.

Then he mounted and set off at a gallop down the trail toward the pass.

Twilight was falling as he neared the canyon, and he drew his horse down to a walk.

All seemed quiet ahead of him, there had been no shot reach his ears, and no sounds were heard up in the pass.

"Can Mad Carl have left and Parson Bill have passed through in safety?" Dick asked the question of himself.

But he could not answer it.

The thought that the fresh trail might have been made by Buckskin Charlie, or Barney searching for him then crossed his mind; but he recalled the fact that the tracks had gone straight on, and had it been either of the cowboys they would have halted there and waked him up.

"No, it was Captain Lillie and no one else, and I've a mind to beat you, pony, for serving me the shabby trick you did and taking me away from my post at the very time I should have been there, and he gave the pony a vicious kick and jerk."

"Poor fellow, you don't know what you have done, so I won't be mean toward you because I am in a bad humor," said Dick.

Then as he entered the pass he continued:

"All is so quiet here that Mad Carl either left before Captain Lillie came along, or he has killed him."

"What is it, boy?" and he addressed the question to his horse.

But if "Boy" did not answer Mad Carl did, for he suddenly sprung from the shadows of the canyon, seized the bridle-rein in an iron grip with one hand, while the other thrust a revolver right into Dick's face.

"You are my game," came the stern words, and Dick knew the voice but too well.

He was fairly caught, but did not lose his presence of mind, though he dared not reach for a weapon as he wished to.

So he said with the utmost coolness:

"Hello, Mad Carl, it's you?"

"Yes, and I know now who it is that I have got my grip on."

"Yes, I am Dick Vail."

"I know you, and I intend to hold you."

"Have you turned road-agent, Mad Carl?"

"Yes, I have become anything that's bad," was the fierce rejoinder.

"That's tough," came the cool response of the boy.

"Well, boy, I'll soon fix you."

"I am in a fix now, Mad Carl."

"If you show your claws I'll cut your throat as I would a coyote's."

"Come!" he led the pony to the bush where his lariat was still tied, and having taken Dick's belt of arms and rifle, bound him securely to his saddle as he had done Pawnee Bill.

"Now you will go with me, boy," he said savagely.

"To the ranch?" innocently asked Dick.

"Durn you, no! to my wolf's den."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FLIGHT OF MAD CARL.

THE coolness of Dick seemed to fret the Mad Cowboy, for he seemed anxious to have him show fear of him.

Catching him as he did, coming from beyond the pass, the Mad Cowboy knew well enough that he had been lying in wait to warn Pawnee Bill of danger.

In some way he had missed the scout, and finding he had gone by had come on himself, or had gotten tired of the duty of watching and had given it up.

Such were the thoughts of Mad Carl regarding the appearance of Dick in the pass.

Perhaps all of the trails had not been watched and Pawnee Bill had come by one that Dick was not on.

Carl could not understand why Dick did not ask about Pawnee Bill, and the boy was anxious to know if Captain Lillie had been killed by the cowboy, though he would not ask the question.

So, as he could do nothing else, he simply followed the Mad Cowboy down the pass.

A short walk and they came in view of the other prisoner and horses.

"He's captured him," muttered Dick, as he saw a man on horseback, yet in the dim twilight could not see distinctly and only conjectured that it was Pawnee Bill.

"I'm in luck, for I've brought you a fellow prisoner, Pawnee Bill," said the cowboy as he advanced, leading Dick's pony.

"Poor fellow, he has my sympathy," responded Pawnee Bill, gazing fixedly at the boy.

"Yes, you'll have his sympathy before I am done with you."

"I guess you two never met before?"

"Not that I know of; but your last prisoner seems to be a boy?"

"He is, Pawnee Bill."

"So much the worse for him, I fear."

"Oh I don't mind it, sir, for Mad Carl the Cowboy can't scare me," said Dick complacently.

"Oh! you are plucky at least, and I shall hope to see you set free by this fellow whom you call Mad Carl the Cowboy, for he certainly can have nothing against you."

"Oh, yes I have, for that boy is your wife's ally against me, and he was set upon the trail to watch for you and warn you of my being in ambush."

"But he missed you."

"Hah! is this so, my brave boy?" cried Pawnee Bill.

"Yes, sir, for I am Dick Vail, and Miss May is my governess."

"Mad Carl threatened to kill you, and I went ahead to warn you, but my pony ran off and while I was after him you passed, so I came on and fell into the trap," said Dick.

"Well, I am sorry that seeking to aid me has gotten you into trouble, Dick; but where is my wife?"

"At home, sir; but when it is known that Mad Carl has bagged us both I'll bet my pony she takes the trail to rescue us, for I know Miss May well, and she's as good as a man any day when she starts in on a trail."

"You do know her well, that is certain, Dick, and I agree with you that she will not let us long remain in the clutches of this gentleman, who just now seems to be in great luck, holding trump cards."

"Come, I want no more chin music between you, and if you talk any more I'll put a gag in your mouths that will keep you silent."

"I am ready for the trail now," and so saying, having arranged his prisoners and horses in the way he wished them, Mad Carl mounted and led the way down the valley.

Next to him rode Pawnee Bill, his horse being led by a lariat fast to Mad Carl's saddle.

Behind Pawnee Bill's horse came the pack-mule, with the cowboys' belongings, and his lead rope was made fast to the horn of the scout's saddle.

Next followed in lead, the two riderless horses of Mad Carl, and bringing up the rear, his pony led by a lariat fast to the bits of the two animals ahead, was Dick.

It was a strange procession, and Mad Carl the Cowboy was certainly the victor thus far.

He rode on in silence, and after his threat to gag them, both the captain of scouts and young Dick Vail were wisely silent.

One, two hours passed away and the same steady gait was kept up, not a word being uttered by any one.

The Mad Cowboy led the way along a trail which Dick well knew would take them to the Rio Grande.

If he could cross that river and gain the Mexican mountains before Captain Vail and his cowboys could come up with him, their chances for a rescue looked very dim to Dick.

That his father would follow, as soon as it was discovered that the Mad Cowboy had triumphed, the boy felt assured, but would the pursuers be in time?

Once in Mexico and Dick was well aware that the Cowboy Rangers could do little, if anything, toward a rescue.

Having decided that Mexico was the destination of the cowboy, Dick made up his mind that he must make his escape in some way, and that way he must quickly decide upon.

His first effort was to see how securely he was bound.

Fortunately for him, though his hands were secured with a horse-hair lariat, he could raise them to his lips, they not being bound to his saddle-born.

Dick had sharp teeth, and he at once began to gnaw on the horse-hair rope, and with right good results.

Every now and then the cowboy would glance behind him, and down would go Dick's hands.

Then, to the boy's regret, the moon peered above a range of hills, and shining full in his face he had to be most careful lest the Mad Cowboy should see what he was about.

But he kept up his gnawing of the horse-hair rope, until at last he felt that his hands at least were free.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DARING DICK.

DICK was a wiry-formed fellow, who could throw somersets forward and backward, walk on his hands and cut up as many monkey shins as a clown in a circus.

When but ten years of age his father had taken him to town with him and there Dick had enjoyed seeing a circus, and that set him to work to emulate all he had seen the performers do.

With practice and the aid of the cowboys, he had soon become an expert, riding his pony while standing on his back, and making of himself a perfect athlete.

Now as he rode along, his hands freed from his bonds, Dick set about also freeing his feet.

He wore boots, and around the ankles the rope had been tied, and passed beneath the horse.

When the boots had come to the ranch new, Dick had made the complaint that they were several sizes too large for him, and such was really the fact; but now he had reason to congratulate himself that it was so, for after a very hard struggle he managed to free one foot from its boot.

He breathed hard after his struggle and success, and then started in to get the left foot out of limbo.

Somehow the rope about the left ankle was drawn closer than about the right, and the perspiration streamed from Dick's face in his severe efforts to free his foot.

He had to keep his eyes constantly upon Mad Carl, and his hands before him on the horn of his saddle as though they were still bound, while he dared not exert himself too much for fear a quick glance of the cowboy might give him a suspicion of what he was after.

At last he felt his foot slipping slightly, and he kept up the strain until it passed between the ropes about the ankle.

Raising his leg he drew his foot from his boot, and then sat perfectly still, watching Mad Carl with a look of innocence that was ludicrous.

He had freed his hands, and at last his feet, as they went along, though he had been several hours engaged in the work.

He grew nervous now, fearing that Mad Carl would halt for rest, and was anxious to get away.

He would have been delighted could he have drawn his pony nearer the horses in front of him, gathered up the slack of the rope and gnawed it in two, but this he dared not attempt, so gave up all thought of it.

The trail now ran down a valley, on the banks of a small stream, and Dick saw ahead a range of hills heavily wooded.

To slip off his pony there in the valley would be to find himself detected and to be brought up with a shot.

So he waited as patiently as he could until they should reach the timbered range ahead.

He wanted to attract the attention of Pawnee Bill to the fact that he was free and was going to skip at the first opportunity, but what he might do to cause the scout to look back might

bring Mad Carl to a halt to see what was the matter.

"He'll know I'm gone, when Mad Carl finds it out," he muttered, and then he rode innocently along, his eyes upon the timbered range ahead.

The moon had been for some days on the wane—yet still shone with brilliant radiance from a cloudless sky, and Dick regretted exceedingly that such was the case.

Still he must take the chances, and after having freed himself as he had, he would, had Mad Carl halted just then, have risked a shot and made a dash for freedom.

The trail soon crossed the stream, and Mad Carl halted to water the horses, Dick riding upright, the ends of his lasso in his hands, his legs close to his boots and looking as though he was as secure as ever.

"When are you going to halt for a rest, Mad Carl, for I am tired?" he asked innocently.

"You'll be more tired still before I am done with you, boy," was the surly response.

"Well, I guess I can stand it if you can; but I am hungry."

"I have no time to halt, and you only wish to have me do so, as you hope pursuers are after me."

"But it will be some time before they follow my trail."

Dick was afraid that this would be the case, yet replied:

"I don't know, for the Cowboy Rangers move quick, and Buckskin Charlie is captain now in your place, Mad Carl, and you know what he is."

"Shut up, if you do not wish me to gag you."

This silenced the boy, while Pawnee Bill said in a kindly tone:

"Don't make it any worse for yourself, my lad, than it now is."

So on once more Mad Carl led the way across the valley toward the range.

The trail entered the timber and wound on up the side of the hills to pass over it.

As they neared the top of the range Dick saw that the timber was getting thinner ahead, and so made up his mind to hesitate no longer.

The large trees cast shadows upon the trail, though the moonlight peered between in places.

But that was Dick's opportunity, and he made the best of it.

He carefully slipped out of his saddle upon the back of his pony, having the presence of mind to unfasten his blanket and haversack of provisions, for he knew he would need them.

He would be bootless, and have not a weapon, but he would be free.

Slipping further over on his pony, he suddenly dropped down in the trail, and with a bound sought the shelter of a tree.

An instant's halt and he dodged to another, and another, while the cavalcade passed on up the range.

But it was not long before Mad Carl looked back, and as he did so Dick's pony was in a stream of moonlight, and he saw that the boy's saddle was empty.

The yell that followed was that of a madman, and it startled the horses as well as Pawnee Bill with its wildness, so thoroughly unexpected as it was.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PURSUIT.

WHEN all the cowboys were ready for the trail, Buckskin Charlie and Den Ross rode to the front.

They at once took up the trail and followed it around the hill to where Den Ross had left it a while before.

Further on Buckskin Charlie came to a halt.

"A halt was made here, Den."

"Yes, sure."

"We must find out why."

"Sartin."

So they began to read the signs, rode away toward the pass, and then came back to where Captain Vail and the others awaited them.

"Well, Buckskin Charlie, you have made some discovery?"

"Yes, captain, the first prisoner must have been Pawnee Bill, for when Mad Carl reached this spot he halted his outfit, walked up to the pass and came back leading a pony."

"A pony?"

"Yes, sir, Dick's."

"Oh! then my boy is a prisoner surely?"

"If he was on the pony, sir, when Mad Carl caught him, he is."

"Charlie?"

"Yes, sir."

"You saw no signs of violence, no blood-stains, no grave, a body?"

"No, sir, I think Dick escaped from his pony, or is a prisoner with Pawnee Bill."

"That is Den Ross's opinion too?"

"Yes, cap'n it be."

"Then we must push on."

"For all we are worth, sir."

"You and Ross lead then, Charlie, and don't spare the cattle," said the ranchero eagerly, and at once the party of horsemen pushed on and at a rapid pace.

Charlie Owens read the signs well, as has been seen, and he followed the trail in splendid style.

Where Mad Carl had been forced to go in a walk, a slow trot, incumbered as he was, the Cowboy Rangers moved along at a canter, making three times the speed of the fugitives.

But fast as they went they had a long distance yet between them and the Mad Cowboy, when they halted for rest and dinner.

But the halt was a short one and once more they pushed on at the same swift pace, until several more hours had passed, when all were startled by a loud halloo. Instantly they drew rein, and there upon a hill they beheld none other than Dick waving his sombrero to them.

A yell burst in chorus from the lips of the Cowboy Rangers, in which the voice of the ranchero was distinctly heard, as he recognized his boy.

Instantly all spurred toward Dick, who came down the hill at a run.

Soon the boy reached his father's side and their hands were warmly clasped, while all eyes were bent upon Dick.

He was pale, looked baggard, yet was cheerful, and in place of his boots were strips of blanket cut off and wrapped around his feet with strings made from the silk neck handkerchief he had worn.

"Why Dick, where are your boots?" asked the ranchero.

"I left them with Mad Carl, as it was not convenient to bring them along, father," and Dick's eyes twinkled with the remembrance.

"Come, Dick, tell us what has happened?"

"Well, father, my pony played me a shabby trick by running off, when I was on post waiting for Captain Lillie, and while I was away after him, Pawnee Bill passed."

"I saw his trail on my return, followed and rode right into Mad Carl's grip."

"And Captain Lillie?" eagerly asked the ranchero.

"Oh, he had ridden into the pass, was lassoed and dragged from his horse, and badly hurt, for his head was bound up, and so he was a prisoner too."

"And then?"

"Why Mad Carl set off with us and his outfit, to take us to what he called his wolf den."

"But you know I have sharp teeth, father?"

"Yes."

"Well, I gnawed the horsehair lariat in two, that bound my hands, and do you remember how big those boots were for me?"

"I do, and how much you growled about them, Dick."

"Well I'm glad they were too big, for I slipped my feet out of them after some hours' hard work, leaving them tied to the saddle."

A yell broke from the cowboys here, followed by the words of Den Ross:

"Bully for you, Dick!"

"I then slipped off of the back of my pony and dodged into the timber."

"But Mad Carl was but a minute in finding out that I had gone, and he scared every wolf, owl, and bird for miles around, with the yell he gave, and he scared me too; but I ran like a deer, though the stones hurt my feet badly, and so got away."

"I then tore off pieces of my blanket and made these shoes, and was hunting home when I saw you."

"Three cheers, pards, for Daring Dick," cried Buckskin Charlie and they were given with a will.

"Now about Mad Carl, Dick?" said his father.

"Oh, I guess he went on his way with the captain, when he found he could not catch me."

"When was this?"

"About midnight last night, sir."

"Over twelve hours ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"And where was it?"

"On the range beyond Red Creek Valley."

"How far is that from here, Buckskin Charlie?" asked Captain Vail.

"All of twenty miles, sir."

"Dick, you have traveled well with your blanket shoes," said Charlie Owens.

"I was on the home trail, Charlie," was the

boy's reply with a laugh, for all of his sorrows were forgotten now.

But he added a moment after:

"I hope you can catch Mad Carl, and save Captain Lillie, for he is making for Mexico."

"To cross the Rio Grande?"

"Yes, sir, and he means to do the captain all the harm he can."

"It is twenty miles from here to where you left him, so he must be nearly double that distance ahead of us yet."

"But we will follow him into Mexico," Buckskin Charlie said in his determined way.

And as he spoke he moved on ahead once more, Dick mounting to a seat behind his father.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MAD COWBOY'S RETREAT.

WHEN Mad Carl the Cowboy caught sight of Dick's empty saddle he burst forth in the yell that the boy told the Cowboy Rangers had scared wolves, birds and himself.

He threw himself from his saddle and rushed back to the pony, while he cried:

"Curses upon him! he has slipped out of his bonds and his boots like an eel; but it was not a minute ago, and I may catch him."

"Not him," coolly said Pawnee Bill, who could not smother a laugh, and his joy at the boy's escape.

The Mad Cowboy did not then heed him, but ran back down the trail for a short distance.

It then flashed upon Pawnee Bill to make an effort to escape, but he saw how useless it would be.

The horses were all tied together, and thus hampered they could not have gone as rapidly as a man could run along the trail.

Besides, Mad Carl had his rifle slung at his back and could have brought down one of the animals with a shot and that would have checked the flight of all.

Then Mad Carl did not go out of easy range, as he knew Pawnee Bill was not to be given too great leeway to escape and not make it good.

He gave up his run after Dick, who was quietly watching him from behind a distant tree, and returned to his prisoner with the savage remark:

"You saw him make his escape, curse you!"

"I did not, but had I done so I would never have told you, if that's what you mean."

"It will be the worse for you, Pawnee Bill, that you did not."

"I do not fear threats, sir, nor has death any terrors for me."

"Well, let him go, for he has no weapons, is barefooted, and it will take him days to get home, if he does not starve, or is not eaten by the wolves."

"That boy will not starve, nor will he let the wolves make a feast of him, for he's able to take care of himself, as you have just discovered," said Pawnee Bill.

"Well, you could not escape."

"No, I was not so fortunate; but, candidly, I have not given up all hope that I cannot yet do so."

This cool assertion made the Mad Cowboy rave, and cursing Dick and Pawnee Bill savagely, he mounted his horse and led the flight once more.

Not until day dawned did he stop for rest, and then he took particular care to give the horses the best feeding-place he could find.

For food he ate some bread and cold meat, in silence, and never once offered to share it with his prisoner, who said:

"I say, pard, fright has not taken my appetite away, and I'd thank you for a bite."

But Mad Carl vouchsafed no reply, and soon after once more got his horses together, bound his prisoner again to his saddle, and went on his way.

At noon he came to the ford leading across the river.

Here met several trails, from up and down the stream, and the tracks were numerous.

Halting before entering the water the cowboy went back to his prisoner, took his red sash from about his waist and securely blindfolded him.

Then he again mounted and led the horses into the river.

But he did not keep straight on across the river, as the ford went, but turned short off to the right, heading up the stream, and close to the right bank.

For nearly a quarter of a mile he pushed on up against the stream, the water at times nearly raising the horses from their feet, and several times causing Dick's pony to swim.

At last he turned in toward the banks, where

they towered far above him, and entered a ravine down which flowed a rivulet, emptying into the river.

It was very evident that Mad Carl was hunting a secure hiding-place well known to him.

Up the ravine he made his way until he came to a little valley, encircled by the wildest of surroundings, overhanging cliffs which showed that approach from any direction, save the one which the Mad Cowboy had come, was impossible.

Once in the valley, he dismounted, and untied the bandage from the eyes of his prisoner, who remarked in his never-to-be-surprised way:

"Well, you have found a pretty spot here indeed."

"Yes, and no one else can find it."

"That remains to be seen."

"It is to be your prison for awhile, and you will discover that it is safe enough."

"Now I'll make the horses secure, for it is only a matter of tying lariats across the ravine yonder to prevent their straying."

Pawnee Bill watched him with considerable interest, saw him fasten the lariats across the entrance to the valley, tying them to posts already in position, which showed that the valley had been used before as a retreat.

The animals were then turned loose, and with water and grass in plenty, were content.

Back in a clump of trees, at the upper end of the valley, the Mad Cowboy pitched his camp, and the remains of fires built long before were visible, while there was also a brush shelter under which the pack-saddles, weapons and blankets were placed.

"Here will be your quarters, and as I intend to organize a band of Mexican cut-throats, I will soon have plenty of guards for you."

"Would you be so vile as that, to war with Mexicans against your own people?" said Pawnee Bill, indignantly.

"Oh, yes, I'll do worse in time, for I know where I can get the Mexicans, not many miles away, and my first raid will be for revenge."

"Against whom?"

"I'll strike the Vail Ranch and loot it, and more, I shall take May Lillie captive, and when I have made her a widow, she shall become my wife," and the Mad Cowboy laughed with malignant joy at the expression his words brought to the face of Pawnee Bill.

Soon after he said:

"I'll cook supper and give you some, and then I'll go after the Mexicans, leaving you here; but you need have no hope of escape, for I'll see to that, as I know very well, Pawnee Bill, you are as cunning as an Indian, and as hard to hold."

The fire was built first, as darkness fell upon the earth, the Mad Cowboy prepared a supper of broiled dried meat, coffee and toasted bread, and of which Pawnee Bill ate with considerable relish.

Then he bound his prisoner at equal distance between two trees, and mounting his horse rode away in the darkness down the ravine toward the river, the way he had come.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DRAWING LOTS.

THE party of Cowboy Rangers had not gone far on their way, after meeting with Dick, before an idea entered the head of Buckskin Charlie, which he deemed a good one.

So he dropped back in line alongside of the horse of the ranchero, and said:

"Captain Vail, we are pressing our horses rather hard."

"Yes, Charlie."

"And yours is doing double duty in carrying Dick."

"That is true, and he feels it."

"Would it not be a good idea, sir, to send several of the boys back to the ranch?"

"Why?"

"Well, sir, Dick has had an awful hard time of it, his feet are in a wretched condition, and he needs care."

"No, I don't," said Dick, stoutly.

"I was going to suggest, sir, that we have a large force for the capture of one man, and three of the boys could go back with Dick, they taking turns in riding, while he could have an animal for himself."

"I think it would be a good idea, Owens; and I am glad you mentioned it," said Captain Vail, halting the party.

"I don't think it is a good idea, and I do not intend to desert the command," said Dick, warmly.

"But, my son, you are really suffering with your cut and bruised feet, and—"

"I can stand the pain if I can go on."

"I was the one who found Mad Carl, Pawnee Bill and me, and if I wasn't there when you caught him he'd feel awful bad about it."

"No, I don't go back."

Captain Vail was really proud of the boy's pluck, and instead of rebuking him, smiled and said:

"Well, Dick, I suppose you will have to go with us; but I am glad Owens spoke of it, as it is best to send some one back to the ranch to relieve the anxiety of your mother and Miss May."

"We do not know how long we will be gone, and, as Charlie says, there is a large force here to capture one man, desperate though he be."

"I'd suggest you send back the men whose horses feel the pull most, sir," said Buckskin Charlie.

"Yes, I'll send four men, and three horses, giving Dick one to ride," said the captain.

But the men dissented here, all being anxious to go on and aid in the capture and hanging of Mad Carl, for after all he had done they firmly made up their minds that if taken alive the cowboy should be strung up.

"There is but one way to settle it, sir."

"How is that, Owens?"

"Let the men draw lots, sir."

"Well, the captain, and you, too, Buckskin Charlie, must also draw lots," said Barney.

Both demurred at this, but seeing that there was no other way they agreed to it, for both saw that they could lose no time, and more, felt that with some of the horses left behind they could go at a faster gait, for it was decided that if any one with a comparatively fresh animal drew a lot to return, he was to let another who went along take his horse.

So the lots, silver quarters, were put in a hat, and shaken together, certain dates being named as the ones to send back those who drew them.

"You draw first, Dick," said Buckskin Charlie.

"No, I don't, for I'm a boy, and not in this game."

"The parson said it was wrong to gamble."

"But this is not a gambling game, Dick," said the ranchero, as all the men laughed.

"Yes, it is, for it's drawing for prizes, and I won't do it."

Urging was useless. Dick was determined not to trust to luck and have to go back if he drew the lot that forced him to do so, and so Buckskin Charlie said with a laugh:

"I suppose Dick will go, sir, so we may as well go on with the drawing."

"Dick goes on the man-hunt," was the determined response of the boy, and so the cowboys yielded with a laugh to his will, and drew their lots.

It fell to Captain Vail to go, and Buckskin Charlie also, and five had to return, four of them mounted, so that Dick got the odd horse and was happy.

Then the cowboys who were to return started on the back track, to take turns in walking, and the others mounted and went on at a swifter pace, the horses refreshed by their rest.

The pace then tried was a brisk one, and all could not but note the very joyous look that wreathed the face of Dick, who forgot his feet in the delight of being on the war-path after Mad Carl the Cowboy.

The trail of the fugitive and his captive was a broad one, and Buckskin Charlie had no trouble in following it.

It was just sunset when they reached the river ford, and Buckskin Charlie said:

"He has crossed, sir."

"And what is to be done?"

"The trail is so fresh, Captain Vail, that he cannot be very far ahead."

"Then too, his cattle must be well fagged out as ours are."

"We cannot follow the trail after crossing the river, Owens?"

"No, sir, not at night."

"Then it would be well to go into camp here until before dawn, cross and be ready with the first break of day to pick the trail up upon the other side."

"That is best, sir, for it will give our horses a long rest to-night, and besides Mad Carl will not, I think, go very far on the other side, nor expect us to follow him there."

Thus it was decided to seek a camping-place and not very far from the ford a good spot was found where both men and their horses could get much needed rest.

Knowing how much depended on their faithful animals the cowboys looked to them before they did to their own comfort, and rubbed them down well, watered them and staked them out to feed.

Then a cold supper was eaten, for they would

not light a camp-fire, and with one man on guard, Buckskin Charlie taking the watch, the others wrapped themselves in their blankets and were soon asleep.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ALONE ON THE TRAIL.

THAT May Lillie had been considerably shaken up by her treatment at the hands of Mad Carl, the Cowboy, there was no doubt.

Her being bound to her horse, and the run for life from the wolves was enough to terrify the bravest man, let alone a woman.

But May Lillie was made of stern material, and she rallied very quickly from the shock, bathed her swollen wrists with arnica, and dropped to sleep the moment she went to bed.

But after a few hours of rest she awoke.

Then in the stillness of the early dawn it came to her in all its horror that after all Gordon Lillie might be the captive of Mad Carl.

After the threats of the Mad Cowboy, the thought was a fearful one, and she could not longer sleep.

So she arose with the firm resolve in her heart to go on after the gallant band of cowboys.

She would not remain behind in safety while others were risking their lives to rescue her loved husband, the hero of her young life.

In vain was it that Mrs. Vail urged against it, and Violet Vail begged, she was determined to go.

So at last Mrs. Vail said that it would be well to have a couple of cowboys accompany her.

No, she would go alone. Violet then, a young maid full of a spirit of adventure urged to go with her.

"No, Captain Vail and Dick are both away now in my service."

"I will go alone," was the firm reply.

As she was determined, Mrs. Vail said it would be well for her to take with her a lot of provisions for the men, who might be detained.

"I will take a pack-horse and carry them."

"It will be a rest for my horse to change to him, if I have to press them hard," was her reply.

So the two very best animals on the ranch were selected, and May's saddle and bridle put on one, a bag of provisions strapped upon the other and the lead line handed to her.

It was with sad hearts that Mrs. Vail and Violet saw her ride away after breakfast, for they knew her daring nature and determined will, and felt that she would stop at no obstacle that could be surmounted, to rescue the man she loved.

At a steady pace she went over the prairie, following the trail she had fled along the night before.

She pressed her horses, yet not too hard, and several times changed from one to the other, to relieve them from her weight, which was more than double that of the bag of provisions.

It was nearly noon when she reached the pass, and she regarded the trails there with the eye of one who knew what she was about.

She went about on foot, allowing her horses to rest, and crop a dinner of grass, having relieved their backs of the saddle and pack, for she seemed to fully understand that she must do all in her power for them, as all depended upon their speed and endurance.

She went to the pass, saw the morning camp of the Cowboy Rangers, and examined every trail carefully and understandingly.

After an hour's halt she seemed to have made up her mind as to the situation, and that she had done so correctly her musings will show.

"They halted here, sent for Buckskin Charlie and the others stationed upon the trail, and then went toward the Rio Grande."

"They would not have gone that way had they not been upon the trail of Mad Carl the Cowboy."

"And that is the way for me to go."

So saying she ate her dinner, a sandwich Mrs. Vail had especially prepared for her, with a flask of cold tea, and then saddling her horses, she sprang lightly upon the back of the one she intended to ride and pushed them ahead once more at a lively pace.

Several hours after she came to a sudden halt, for looking up from the trail she beheld several horsemen ahead.

There were four horsemen and a man on foot. They had seen her too and were coming more briskly forward.

"They are Cowboy Rangers from the ranch."

"Now I will know all," she said and she rode rapidly forward to meet them.

The cowboys welcomed her with a cheer, but at once said in chorus:

"You must go back with us, Lariat Queen!"

"You don't know me if you think so, pards, for my trial lies the way I am going, and I shall see the end of it before I stop."

"Now tell me the news."

"Well, Lariat Queen, we drew lots to see who should go back, and here we are, for the horses was played out."

"And the others?"

"Have gone on after that devil, Mad Carl, and his prisoner."

"Who is the prisoner?"

"Well, he had two, Pawnee Bill—"

"Ah!"

"And Dick; but Dick gave him the slip, and we met him on the trail making for home."

"Brave boy!"

"He's all that, Queen, and more, for the little rooster was barefooted and his feet hurt by the rocks; but he wouldn't give up, nor would he share lots with us, although Buckskin Charlie was anxious to put up a job on him to send him back, knowing he was suffering."

"So we gave him a horse and he went on with the gang."

"And Dick said that Pawnee Bill was the prisoner of Mad Carl?"

"Yes, he seen him."

"Well, I shall go on, and I thank you for what you tell me."

"Tell Mrs. Vail I am all right and will overtake the captain and his rangers by nightfall."

"Good-by."

"Let one of us go on your led horse, Queen?" cried a cowboy.

"Oh, no, thank you, for it would only detain me," and with a wave of her hand the daring girl rode on once more, greatly cheered to feel that she had not gone wrong in following the trail, and grieving that her husband was really in the power of Mad Carl.

"My God! he will kill him before he will allow the rangers to rescue him."

"I must hasten and overtake them, so that they can accomplish by strategy what they dare not attempt by force, if they wish to save poor Gordon from death."

"And noble little Dick!"

"He is indeed a young hero."

"But I must not think, but press on."

And the horses were urged the faster, and the miles were cast behind them.

They began to lag at last, just as darkness came on; but the night's coming did not check the tireless girl, for the trail was a broad one and the horses followed it readily.

They were now in the broad track leading to the river, and she could not miss her way unless the cowboys turned off in following Mad Carl.

"No, he will not turn off, for he dare not."

"He will press on to cross the river."

"I am right, I know I am," she said firmly.

The horses showed their fatigue more and more, and had they not been splendid animals they could never have stood the strain at which she had kept them from the far-away ranch.

At last, just as the moon rose she came in sight of the river, and riding down to the water's edge came to a halt.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FAIR LARIAT-THROWER.

WHEN she reached the edge of the swiftly flowing river, the heart of the brave girl almost failed her.

What was before her, and where were the gallant Cowboy Rangers whom she had hoped to find there?

The wide river flowed by swiftly and with dangerous look.

Beyond was an unknown land to her.

The crossing was there, yet dare she attempt it in the night, not knowing where it struck the other shore?

The murmur of the sullen waters, the panting of her tired horses alone broke the silence, otherwise intense and solemn.

The moon was above the horizon now, and poured its silvery radiance down upon river and shores.

But it was a treacherous light, for it could not guide her.

At last she decided to venture, for the fugitive cowboy and his prisoner must have passed to the other side.

If he had done so the Cowboy Rangers had certainly followed him there.

Captain Vail, Buckskin Charlie, and little Dick were not to be turned back by dangers she well knew.

To be sure of going right she decided to ride in and leave her led horse while she reconnoitered

ahead to see if she could discover where to come out upon the other bank.

So she hitched the led horse back upon the bank, and again rode down to the river's edge.

As she halted to gain strength for the ordeal, she heard a splash.

Then another and another reached her ears, and the sound came from up the river.

She drew back in the shadow of a clump of mesquites and peered cautiously in the direction of the sound, soon to discover a horseman coming down the river.

He seemed to know the shallow places, for he guided his horse this way and that with great care.

He was a white man she saw; and more: the moon revealed to her that which almost forced a shriek from her lips.

It was Mad Carl the Cowboy!

It could be no other, for she could never mistake the face, form and dress of that man.

The moon was her friend and plainly revealed her enemy.

She forced her horse back into the shadow of the mesquites, for Mad Carl was coming directly toward where she was, and in an instant her hand had grasped the lariat she so well knew how to throw.

There was intense bitterness in her heart then.

"I could kill him with my revolver, but he must be taken alive!" was her thought.

Nearer came the unsuspecting cowboy, and not until he was about to turn his horse toward the other shore and follow the ford, did he catch sight of his enemy, but in the shadow where she was he failed to recognize her.

The revolver of the Mad Cowboy was in his hand, immediately, and, as he pulled trigger, the coil of the expert thrower settled over his head!

Carl's bullet cut its way through the Lariat Queen's sombrero, but at the instant her horse was wheeled as upon a pivot, and darted up the hill.

The man was dragged from his saddle into the river, and it was not until the outlawed cowboy was dragged half up the hill that the daring young woman was able to check her horse. Then she did so, and, leaping to the ground, stood over him with drawn revolver, while she cried:

"You are my prisoner now, Mad Carl!"

But the man did not move, and she said in a startled tone:

"Heaven grant that I have not killed him!"

As she uttered the words a form sprung toward her, and then came the exclamation:

"The Lariat Queen, as I live!"

"Yes, and there lies Mad Carl, the Cowboy!"

It was Buckskin Charlie who had run to the scene, upon hearing the shot, and now his clear call brought the Cowboy Rangers hastening to the spot, when all gazed with utter amazement upon May Lillie, as she stood there, her lariat grasped in one hand, her revolver in the other, while the form of Mad Carl lay motionless at her feet.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

DICK VAIL was the first one to ask an explanation of May Lillie's being there, with Mad Carl a prisoner, or dead at her feet, when all supposed her to be back at Paradise Ranch.

"I could not allow you to risk your lives in my behalf, while I remained behind, so I came, too, and followed your trail here.

"I hesitated about crossing the river, heard the sound of splashing water, and saw Carl Grafton coming down the stream.

"The moonlight showed me who he was, and I determined to capture him alive, so threw my lariat just as he fired.

"There stands his horse in the river.

"Now tell me if he is dead?"

"He is not, but you gave him a severe fall.

"Bind him, boys, before he comes to, if he is not playing 'possum," said Buckskin Charlie.

Mad Carl was at once securely bound, and well was it so, as he had been choked into unconsciousness by the lariat, and returning to his senses, saw who were his captors.

Then it was that his ravings were those of a madman, and May Lillie said with real pity:

"He is indeed mad, and you shall not hang him.

"No, it would be a crime, and he shall be taken to an asylum."

The cowboys swore and urged, but all to no purpose, for the Lariat Queen was firm, and Captain Vail, Buckskin Charlie and Dick came to her aid, the ranchero saying:

"Yes, the man is mad, and it would, indeed,

be a crime, evil as his life has been, to hang him."

Back to the cowboys' camp all went then, and for May Lillie a tent of blankets was soon made, for nothing could be done until daylight about finding where Mad Carl had made his retreat.

But, with the first glimmer of dawn, Buckskin Charlie, Dick and several others, rode up the stream, the ravine was found, the trail followed to the valley, and there sat Pawnee Bill, rifle in hand, awaiting the return of his captor and his Mexican allies, for he had freed his hands in spite of the seemingly secure manner in which he had been tied.

He and Dick recognized each other at a glance, and thus prevented a shot from the young Chief of Pawnees, who held the advantage of position, and his own weapons, the boy's, and extra ones belonging to Mad Carl.

Explanations followed, and then the horses and traps of the madman were taken and all hastened back to the cowboy camp.

The meeting between Pawnee Bill and his loving bride I will not attempt to describe, but merely go on to relate that he sustained her in not allowing a madman to be hanged, however great had been their wrongs at his hands, and so Mad Carl was sent under escort of Buckskin Charlie and two of his men to take to the asylum at Austin, while the remainder of the party took the back trail for Paradise Ranch.

Since then the deeds of Pawnee Bill, now Major Gordon Lillie, have gone into border history, so that I may as well here end my story of his fair bride, still known as the Queen of the Lariat.

THE END.

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